Dark Frontier Blues

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Fujimi Fantasia Bunko

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【Chapter 1: Rio Robo / Encounter】

Some were crying.
Some didn't even have the strength to cry.
It was an endless, bottomless void. The pitch-black darkness was thick with clammy humidity, saturated with a foul, raw stench. Deep within that darkness, the children wept. They called out for their parents, tormented by hunger. The cold had long since sapped their strength. They had no will left to flee.
No one would come to save them.
In their own childish way, they despaired of their situation... It was the second day.
“Everyone... you're there, aren't you?”
Someone called out.
The children lifted their faces in unison.
There... a faint light appeared. A pale, holy light slowly drew nearer.
And the children truly saw... an angel.
“Thank goodness... you're all safe!” A dazzling smile shone, as if to erase the pitch-black darkness. The voice belonged to a boy so divinely adorable he seemed almost divine. Soft-looking golden hair shimmered and swayed at his shoulders. His large, sky-blue eyes held no cloudiness, radiating a sunlit brilliance.
The Saxon boy, clad in a white robe, knelt before the children, clutching a golden staff. He was an angel straight out of a painting. The children stared at that angelic smile, utterly dumbfounded.
“It's okay now! I've come to save you all!”
It was a strange smile.
Somehow, warmth radiated from it. Finding comfort in this boy they'd just met, the children threw themselves into his embrace without hesitation.
“B-big brother!”
“I was scared! I was so scared!” Hugging them all, the boy nodded.
“It's okay now! You can relax now that I'm here! We can all go home!” The boy placed the golden staff beside him. The pale blue gemstone shining at its tip illuminated the small bag he had taken out. “You haven't eaten anything since you got here, have you? You can have whatever you like.”
From the bag spilled out colorful candies, sponge cakes, and chocolates.
“I-I want this one!” For the first time, the children spoke up. Stopping them from reaching out in a flurry, the boy shared the sweets.
“It's okay, take your time and eat slowly.”
“O-older brother... my arms... I'm so thirsty...”
“Yeah, you can drink this.” The boy also handed over a water bottle he had prepared beforehand. Everyone eagerly drank the warm water. The boy watched their starved forms with a pained expression. Looking closely, he saw that the children's bodies were covered in small cuts. But the boy exhaled deeply and instantly regained his dazzling smile. “But I'm so glad... that you're all alive...”
“Justice!” His relieved back was suddenly called out to.
A sturdy, middle-aged man stood before the boy who turned around. There stood a bearded knight clad in dull silver shining armor.
“Oh, over here... What, everyone is safe!”

“That's great, Pablo!” Justice... The boy who was called that slowly picked up his staff and stood up.
“There were eight children who were kidnapped, right? Everyone should be here.”
“Eh, um... Miguel and Maria... Alberto and Peron... Yes, indeed!”
With a clang of armor, the Guian knight collapsed to the ground. “Whew, I'm so relieved!” Perhaps weighed down by his heavy armor, Knight Pablo was panting heavily. Spotting his kind face, the children jumped up.
“Ah, it's Pablo-sama!”
“Pablo-sama came!”
Pablo looked around happily at the cheering children. “Oh, oh, I'm happy too! I'm so glad everyone is safe! Must be a miracle by the God of Creation!”
“Indeed.” The boy, Justice, closed his eyes and deftly bent his right fingers. He formed the Holy Seal, the symbol of the Holy Order, and made the sign of the cross in front of his chest. “Let us give thanks to Aeolus, the God of Creation, for saving the children. Now, everyone...”
Prompted by a voice full of dignity that didn't seem to belong to a thirteen-year-old, Pablo also made the sign of the cross. The children forgot to stuff their faces and closed their eyes.
But at that moment...
“This is no time for praying!”
With a sudden shout, a fist came crashing down on Justice's head. Pablo was hit next.
The boy frowned in annoyance. “Ouch! What are you doing, Riot?”
“What are YOU doing here, you idiot?! You can pray when you get back to the village! Why are you doing it right now!?” Her voice was piercing.
The children stared up at her in a daze - her bright red hair bounced as if dancing.
The fighter-girl's fists trembled. Her wide stance, tattered cloak, twin swords strapped to her back, and the large pistol hanging at her waist all gave her an air of arrogance.
Yet, not a trace of malice could be seen in her vividly shining red eyes.
The Roman girl snorted. “Really... how can you be so carefree, praying like that?”
"Because praying is my job. I have to thank the Gods for this good fortune..."
“I told you, that can wait!” Riot glanced at the children, then turned back to the knight.
“And you, Pablo! We only agreed to hunt down the mutant beasts! I never heard anything about hostages!”
“Wait, that can't be...” Pablo pointed at Justice fearfully.
“I'm sure I explained that matter properly to Justice...”
“Justice!” Riot grabbed her partner by the collar and gritted her teeth.
“I only agreed to take on the mutant beast hunt for ten thousand dollars... If there's hostage rescue involved too, I'll have to charge extra!”
“I can't do that!” Justice puffed out his cheeks, his dissatisfaction plain to see.
“The villagers who requested this are all poor farmers! They’re the parents of these children! I can't take money from people like that!”
“I'm tired of hearing that from you.” Riot sighed in exasperation.
“Then go to the provincial capital and ask them to send troops. It'll be free.”

"This ain't the time for praying!"
With a cry filled with rage, a fist smashed into Justice's skull!

“It takes three days for a messenger to get from the village to the provincial capital. They'll be eaten alive before we get there.”
“Then just have the village knight, Pablo, fight them. He is a knight, after all.”
“Mister Pablo has stomachaches and backaches. Don't you feel sorry for him?”
“I don't care about that! That's why I hate country knights who can't even become holy knights!”
“Oh, and he has hemorrhoids too.”
Riot felt dizzy. How many times had she endured this pointless conversation over the past year? As the girl tried to compose herself, Pablo timidly spoke up.
“Um... it's almost dawn.”
“So what?”
“I think the Gzurlun will be returning to this nest...”
Hearing that dreaded name, Riott snapped back to attention.
“All right, Pablo, take the children ahead. Justice, you go with them too.”
"No, Riot is the better option as an escort. You guys go, I'll burn this place down." The boy lowered his voice and glanced around. “Otherwise, the Gzurlun will keep coming back and attacking Mr. Pablo's village. Every time that happens, children will be kidnapped, and that's a problem.”
“T-Thank you!” Pablo stood up and led the children toward the exit. Riott turned around, looking worried, and stared intently at her partner.
“Hurry up, Justice.”
“Are you worried about me? I'm a grown man now, I'm fine, I'm fine.”
“It's that overconfidence of yours that worries me.” Shrugging her shoulders as if to say it couldn't be helped, Riot also ran into the darkness.
Watching her back disappear, the boy took a breath. “Well then, let's begin...” Justice illuminated the area with his golden staff. The surroundings were by slimy, wet, shiny black slabs. Groundwater was gushing out at the end of the cave. In that cold underground spring stood several misshapen cones - colored reddish-black and emitting a fishy smell, they were surprisingly neatly arranged in the cave.
“It's good they weren't born yet... Those children would have been fed to the young ones...” Relieved, Justice formed a holy seal with his right hand. Closing his eyes and concentrating, he muttered the incantation.
“First strike...” Sacred power descended upon the boy's hand. “An explosion...”

Pablo, who was leading the way, paused for a moment.
But Riott nodded with a smile.
“Justice is burning down the nest as we speak. Don't worry about him. Let's hurry on.”
“Y-Yes, you're right...”
With the children between them, the group made their way through the dark cave.
“Hey, big sis, where are you from?”
“Which village do you live in?” The children, now completely attached, clung to Riot's hand. Pablo quietly silenced them.
“Now, now, everyone, don’t be so clingy, Lady Riot doesn’t like that...”
“It’s fine, just... hey! Don't wipe your nose on my cloak!” Riot frowned, clearly annoyed.
Still, the children wouldn't leave. Pablo smiled too, noticing the sharp-tongued girl's true nature.

But suddenly... “What's wrong, sis?”

One child called out to Riot as she abruptly stopped - but she didn't answer. Riot was listening intently. No, not just listening—all her detection systems were on high alert.

“Above us, Pablo!” She suddenly shouted, drawing a gun from her belt. Striking the hammer, she fired a burst of bullets overhead.

“Lady Riot!” Depleted uranium armor-piercing rounds accurately tore through several leaping black shadows. The sound of crushed chitin echoed, and slimy bodily fluids flew through the air.

“Kyaaaaaah!” The children cowered, trembling on the spot.The shadows leaping from the cave ceiling were all jet-black monsters. Probably mutated beetles. Their bodies, about a meter long, were covered in glossy black armor. Between their long arms and long legs protruded numerous short, segmented appendages. But the most unsettling feature was their flat heads. Long, grinding fangs protruded from their mouths, searching for prey.

Riot swiftly reloaded her gun as she took down one of the Gzurlun after another.

“There's more! Pablo, behind you!”

Heeding the warning, the knight swung his longsword. “Gahhh!”

A shrill clang of metal on metal. Simultaneously, sparks flew as Pablo's blade snapped clean off.

“Mr. Pablo!” A child's scream mingled with the knight's anguished cry.

One black shadow, having evaded the counterattack, kicked Pablo to the ground and raised the scythe-like blades attached to its arms - but this creature was clearly different in form from the others, its body more than two meters in height.

“Run! Escape!” Seizing the opening, Pablo drew a dagger from his waist. The weary knight bravely thrust the blade into the Gzurlun's throat. “Take the children! Quick!” The knight's anguished voice crossed with the mutated beast's shrieks. The Gzurlun pinned the knight down, forcing its gleaming scythe blade against his chest. Pablo desperately drove his dagger into the mutated beast. But the heavily armored-like carapace wouldn't even scratch it. The hollow clang of blades echoed through the air.

“You two run!” Protecting the children, Riot sprinted through the narrow cave. Leaping over rocky outcrops, the girl urged the children toward the exit.

“Go right ahead! Your fathers are waiting there!”

“Sis, you run too!” The worried children looked back, but the girl stared resolutely at the mutant beast. "Sis, you..."

Riot reached for her waist. Swiftly drawing her pistol, she cocked it sharply. “...This is my job!” She immediately slammed a deafening gunshot into the Gzurlun. Depleted uranium armor-piercing rounds struck its temple, then its shoulder.

Screaming, the mutant beast leapt backward - but the bullets only cracked its shell. Riot let out a disbelieving whistle upon realizing how sturdy the armor was. “Full-grown specimens really are something else! I'm impressed it can withstand this thing's rapid fire!” But calmly, Riot holstered her six-shot revolver. She flipped up her coat, activating all combat functions.

“Full Artificial Muscle, Limiter Disengaged. Enemy Brainwave Jamming Initiated. Post-Combat Activity Logged to Record Sphere.”

His retinas instantly filled with displayed text, analyzing the Gzurlun's combat capabilities from vast mutant beast data. Her prosthetic eye confirmed the children were already far away. “Good, now I can go all out!”

With that shout, Riot leapt high. The Gzurlun flew like a low-slung bullet, closing the distance in one swift motion. Pablo cried out involuntarily as the two collided head-on. “Lady Riot, not so reckless!!”

The mutated beast thrust its scythe from the side, aiming to sever the girl's neck. But Riot effortlessly parried the blow, her lips curling into a defiant smirk. “Too bad... I saw that coming!” The artificial muscles in the girl's arm bulged instantly. Explosive strength violently wrenched Guzurun's left arm free. A gush of foul-smelling bodily fluid spilled out.

“I-Impressive...!” Pablo couldn't think of any other words. The sixteen-year-old girl was overpowering the mutant beast with sheer strength - but the screaming Guzurun slammed his right arm down next. Riot reacted swiftly, shifting her left arm to meet that blow.

“Flame Heat Blade!” Riot launched a thick blade from her prosthetic wrist. The blades clashed violently, flinging the mutated beast's blade upward.

Then she gripped her own right arm. “I'll finish you off with this, then!”

She wrenched her right arm free. The black barrel of a 40mm automatic grenade launcher, built into her arm, was exposed. Point-blank range. Without hesitation, she unleashed a barrage at the Gzurlun. Anti-armor warheads sank into Gzurlun's body one after another. Its abdomen exploded, its head scattering into pieces.

“Y-you did it... As expected...” Unfazed by the explosions, Pablo could only stare in awe at Riot's fighting prowess. “War Armor Demon Riot...” Facing the embodiment of war, the knight was speechless.

To counter the mutated beasts, the War Armor Demon—with weapons embedded throughout its body and every part except its brain artificialized—was this world's strongest weapon. Though outwardly a girl, it was a terrifyingly formidable android.

“Come on, get up.” Riot brushed back her disheveled hair and took a breath. She lent Pablo a hand, brushing the mud off her clothes.

“Ah, it's fine... Still, thank you for saving me from such danger...”

“No need for thanks... But you really are a slob, aren't you?” Riot gave a wry smile and patted the knight's shoulder. “Well, I suppose I'll ask for a higher reward then... You think ten thousand dollars is cheap for saving you from this crisis, don't you?”

“H-heh... But what will the village chief say?”

“Persuade him. Use your knightly virtue.” Smiling confidently, Riot turned her gaze toward the cave exit. “More importantly, you should go too. It's dangerous to send the children ahead alone.”

"You're right. There might be more than one mutant beast. There could be others..."

As he tried to rise, Pablo screamed. This time, another Gzurlun leapt out from behind a rock formation. The mutant beast attacked the unsuspecting Riot, slamming her body against the cave wall.

“Lady Riot!”

The girl was slammed into the cave wall with tremendous force. It wouldn't let her fall.

The Gzurlun, roaring with fury, pinned Riott against the wall with its sickle-like arms.

“Damn it...!” Gritting her teeth in agony, Riot locked horns with the enemy. Unlike the adult she had faced earlier, this one had a large bulge in its lower abdomen.
“The eggs... this must be the mother...!” As the words groaned from her throat, the scythe's blade pressed mercilessly deeper. Riot desperately gripped the arm, trying to stop it. But the moment the blade touched the pale, soft skin, fresh blood began spurting forth.
“Lady Riot! I'm coming now!”
“Do NOT!” The girl shouted, holding Pablo back. “Go to the children instead! Forget about me!”
But the knight bit his lip, unable to speak.
The mutated beast's carapace was too thick for his dagger to pierce. He despised his own helplessness.
“I told you to run...!” Riot strained every muscle. But the blade gradually sank deeper into her throat.
“Lady Riot!” Just as Pablo shouted once more.
“Riot, what's wrong?” A carefree voice echoed through the cave. Suddenly, a boy in white sacred robes sprinted back from the depths of the darkness. The boy, holding a staff, stared in astonishment at the battle between Riot and Gzurlun.
“Huh, isn't that a Mutant Beast!”
“Yeah! Help me!” Riot screamed at the carefree question.
But Justice, who understood already, hurriedly formed a holy seal with his right hand.
“I see, I'll help you now! Just wait!” The boy shouted and raised his golden staff. A holy light exploded from the tip of the staff. At the same time, Justice's voice declared loudly. “Second strike!”
Pablo, who was still lying on the ground, opened his eyes wide.
“Circumventing Shockwave!” The rare gem Metalite enshrined in the staff summoned a blinding light. The power of the Creator God detonated from Justice's hand, which had formed the Holy Seal.
“H-Hold on!” In that instant, a bad feeling ran through Riot. But the girl could only stare at that moment.
The lightning bolt released from Justice's finger roared as it pierced the back of Gzurlun's head. The single strike shattered the thick shell and crushed the mutant beast's skull. In an instant, the mutant beast's head scattered from the impact, and its bodily fluids evaporated instantly from the intense heat.
“This... this is the worst...!” Covered in Gzurlun's foul-smelling bodily fluids, Riot felt like crying. Somehow pushing the heavy beast away, the girl coughed and choked.
“Still, thanks, Justice...”
“I'm glad you're safe, but...” The boy who ran over also grimaced at the stench. “Sorry, I should have blown it away after pulling it further away... I never think things through...”
“I'm tired of hearing that from you...” Wiping the bodily fluids off with her sleeve, Riot turned her gaze. Pablo was still crouched there, staring at the boy.
“Truly, you are a Holy War Officer...” The knight's gaze focused on the golden weapon. It seemed that he now felt awe for the Holy War Staff.
Justice nodded shyly. “Well, yes, but I’m still just a trainee.”

"No, it was a wonderful miracle..." Once again... Pablo's eyes lit up with respect and admiration. A being known to everyone in this world. And for the inhabitants of the frontier, a legendary figure rarely seen. That was him – Justice.

It is said that there were once eight continents on the planet.
On the planet created by the Creator God, Aeolus, the children of men prospered, and a mature civilization flourished.
But it all came crashing down. A force rose up in rebellion against the Creator God.
It was the appearance of the original sinner, the evil god Lucifer, whom the Creator God had mistakenly brought into being. The evil god led hundreds of millions of evil spirits and banished the Creator God into the darkness beyond.
The sun lost its power, and the constellations scattered.
The eight continents began to move, colliding and merging into one vast landmass. This cataclysm swallowed eight billion people, utterly shattering human society.
It was the apocalypse known as the Ancient Catastrophe.
Even so, the barely surviving human society recovered enough to rebuild city-states.
Even in a world shrouded in darkness, where evil spirits roamed freely, people struggled desperately to survive.
The Dark Frontier.
This is the story of that world...

Squish... squish... squish... The mud made a sound, bubbling and foaming. Beneath the black mud must lie pockets of toxic gas. The trade route reeked of foul odors.
"Welcome to the Trading Village of Rio Robo" - the rusted signpost creaked and groaned, whipped by the cold, damp east wind. Rough wooden houses lined both sides of the trade route. About fifty of them. This was Rio Robo Trading Village, the closest settlement to the Nevoa Wetlands.
"I truly don't know how to thank you..." At the Holy Church, which sat at the village center, Knight Pablo bowed repeatedly. "Thank you for lending us your strength while on your pilgrimage. We were able to rescue the children safely. Everyone is grateful."
"That's all well and good, but..." Sitting at a rickety old table, Riot looked around at the dinner spread with dissatisfaction. "This is what you call a thank-you feast? Just bean soup and black bread? I won't even have the energy to sleep."
"This is the best hospitality the villagers can offer, Riot." Justice politely made the sign of the cross in front of his chest. "So I will gratefully accept it. Thank you very much, Mr. Pablo."
"Later, we'll have white tapon mousse for dessert..."
"What! I love white tapon! Wow, what a wonderful feast today!" Politely, the boy also made the sign of the cross to Pablo. The knight blushed in embarrassment. Politely, the boy also made the sign of the cross to Pablo. The knight flushed crimson in embarrassment.
"No, you needn't be so formal..."
"That's just being sarcastic, you know." Resigned, Riott began nibbling on her black bread.

It was a village belonging to the city-state of Vaslan, but it lay far from the central capital, let alone the smaller satellite cities or even the regional towns. Realizing this, the Armored Warrior murmured softly. “Well, in a remote village like this, food must be scarce. I hear the Guiana region suffers from chronic food shortages...”
“No, the harvest just ended, so normally this should be a time of plenty...”
At Pablo's words, Riot's eyebrows shot up sharply. “Yeah, so where is it?”
“Er, well... a delegation of Holy War Officials arrived from Central City Vaslan...”
Riot abruptly pushed away her soup bowl, clutching her head in anguish. “You're kidding me! You gave away our food for those guys? How many of them came, anyway?”
“Over a hundred, roughly...”
“And that's why our dinner ended up like this?”
“Well, to put it bluntly...”
Pouting in displeasure, Riot glared sideways at Pablo. “But priests are basically vegetarians, right? Didn't you give them any meat?”

“Well, the Holy Knights were also in attendance... Today we roasted three precious whole cattle.”
“I protest!” Riot rose abruptly and declared. “If you want to eat, bring your own food! To steal it from the village... I’ll make sure to tell them how I feel about this!”
“No, that's unnecessary...”
Justice agreed with the confused knight. “Riot... You're resentful because you missed out on the feast, aren't you?”
“Do you think I'm that greedy? Don't underestimate me. This is for the sake of equal social justice.” Ignoring the girl's speech, Justice looked at Pablo with concern.
“But if Vaslan's Holy War Officer is here, wouldn’t he be an important guest of the village? Shouldn't you be with him now?”
The church in Rio Robo Village has only one knight and one priest. The knight is Pablo, and Pablo's wife serves as the priest. The two of them are in charge of everything from religious ceremonies to troublesome matters and even court cases. They can be said to be the village representatives, second only to the village chief.
But Pablo kept smiling. "It seems they stopped by suddenly without any notice. The mayor says a greeting is sufficient. He apparently has no need for a mere knight like me."
“To take all the food like that, without any notice...” Riot's anger flared. “What business do they have here from Vaslan anyway?” Approaching the window, the warrior demon narrowed her eyes.
The fading sky deepened into darkness, and faint lights began to glow in the houses. At the village's edge, the flickering bonfire of a covered wagon train glowed.
“Alright, that's the place. I'll bring down the hammer of justice on those rotten Holy War officials!”
“What?! You're really going?”
“Of course! I'm a woman of my word! Just watch me!”
Riot pushed open the church door. Pablo hurriedly followed her. “Lady Riott, please don’t...!” But the moment she opened the door, Riot stopped dead in her tracks. In front of the gate, a small man in blue clothing bowed politely.
"Excuse me... I am Raemos, Supreme Councilor of the city-state of Vaslan."
Behind him, someone who appeared to be his attendant also bowed.
Turning around, Riot met Justice's gaze, his confusion evident.
A councilor was the highest administrative official governing a city-state. They were powerful figures, on par with the generals who commanded the military and the church leaders who commanded the Holy Church.
However, the man who introduced himself as Raemos did not exude much dignity. He peered into the church with a gentle face, his back slightly hunched.
“I see you are Justice, the Holy War Officer, and Riot, the Armored Demon.”
“That is correct, but...” Justice also stood up and nodded. Riott hurriedly pretended to be calm.
“What on earth do you want? We're in the middle of a sumptuous dinner. If you have business, please make it quick.”
But Raemos' gaze was earnest. “I have a request. We need people like you. That is why I have come to meet you.”
“I'm just a Holy War Officer.”

“And I'm just a Battle Armor Demon.”
“That's why I'm asking.” Raemos bowed his head again. “We are being targeted by the Evil God. Our lives... no, our very brains are being targeted.”
The boy glanced back at Riott.
Silently, the Battle Armor Demon nodded too.
A new guest joined their dinner.

Leaving the attendants outside, only Raemos sat at the church table. Pablo had also stepped away. Only the boy and girl sat before Raemos.
He was probably around thirty. His black hair was stiff with oil, and he sat with a pained expression. His blue robe stood out, making his face look unnaturally pale.
“I hate to show you this after dinner...” Saying that, Raemos held out a palm-sized piece of metal. It was a portable memory card capable of storing tens of thousands of flat images. Riot took it and slowly activated it. The moment she did, her face contorted.
“You're having dessert later, right?”
“You shouldn't look at this then, Justice.”
“Huh? Why?” But the boy boldly snatched the memory card. The moment he glanced at it, he turned pale.
“This...” Speechless, he thrust it back at Riot. The Battle Armor Demon looked at the “crime scene photos” once more.
It looked like splattered fruit.
But what was cracked open was a human skull. The skull protruded from a large gash. However, the center of the gash had become a gaping hole.
“The victims were council members like you, right?”
Noticing the victim's blue robe, Riot switched through the images one after another.
“Next is a woman... Next is a child. The whole family?”
“Twenty-two people, including the servants.” Laemos sighed and nodded. “Ten days ago. The entire family of Councilor Enrique had their brains stolen overnight.”
“There’s some evil sect crest...” Riot handed the record card to Justice. The boy, his face still pale, peered fearfully at the images.
It was probably the entrance plaza of the mansion. Huge, twisted white letters were scrawled obscenely across the wide red carpet. The boy tilted his head and reached for his belt. The brown notebook he pulled out was worn and tattered.
Justice sighed as he flipped through the notebook labeled “The Book of Eisen.”
“I'm sorry, I don’t know this heretical symbol...”
“It's fine. The Holy War Officer who inspected the scene didn’t recognize it either, nor are there any records of it in the church.” Raemos exhaled heavily again. “Furthermore, Councilor Perez was brutally murdered five days ago, and Holy War Officer Galiego was murdered three days ago.”
“Total number of victims?”
“Seventy-two. Anyway, fact of the matter is, Councilors and Holy War Officers holding key positions in Vaslan were killed one after another.”
“I see... But why are you in such a remote village? Any clues?” In response to Riot's question, the Councilor spread an old-fashioned paper map on the table.

“Ahead of us... there used to be a village called Warun, but it's abandoned now. It's been uninhabited for a while, but people have been seeing strange lights flying towards it.”
“Lights...?” Justice frowned, and Raemos pointed to the record card in his hand.
“Yes, please go ahead.” The boy switched the image. What appeared was a slightly blurred image, as if the shutter had been pressed in a hurry. In the darkness, numerous red lights danced wildly.
“Next is an enlarged analysis of the image. Please take a look.”
“Uh... Whoa!” Hearing Justice's small scream, Riot also leaned forward and stared intently at the image. She grimaced and sympathized with the boy.
“We'll have dessert tomorrow morning.”
Amidst the swirling red lights, slimy brain matter floated. The image was so clear that it was exceptionally vivid.
“The Holy Church and the Council agreed. There is something at the site of the former village of Warun... With that in mind, an elite investigation team was formed.”
“Then tell me...” Stretching with a groan, Riot turned a sleepy gaze toward the client facing him. “Why ask us for backup?”
“Riot, that's...”
“The investigation force alone has over a dozen Holy War Officers, and about a hundred Holy Knights, right?” Riot restrained the boy and glared sideways at Raemos. “You should be able to handle this on your own. Why don't you?”
“I just want as many allies as possible.” Raemos said in a serious voice. "Perhaps... the enemy that challenged us is an evil spirit. If so, we can use all the Holy Warriors we can get. The village chief told me that when I mentioned it - he said there was a Holy War Officer on a pilgrimage here..."
Seeing Justice's puzzled expression, Raemos smiled slightly. “I heard you destroyed a nest of mutant beasts. With skills like that, I would very much like you to join our escort... That is why I came.” Raemos wiped the sweat from his forehead. “In particular, we desperately need the cooperation of Holy Warrior Justice. When facing a high-ranking evil spirit, we need as many Holy Warriors as possible.”
Riot stared at the councilor with discontent. But Raemos ignored the piercing gaze of the Armored Warrior and faced the Holy Warrior directly. “I beg you, Holy War Officer Justice, please help us! We will reward you appropriately!”
The boy stared at the “scene photos,” then at Raemos, and finally at his partner. “Riot...” Justice peered into his partner's face.
But the Battle Armor Demon smiled sullenly. “You heard about the mutant beast extermination, right?”
“Y-yes, of course...”
“And that you're back today?”
When Raemos nodded, the girl fiddled with her hair, looking annoyed. “Then you understand we're tired, right? We want to sleep early tonight. We’ll give our answer on the request tomorrow.”
“Eh, but, Riot...” Riot pinched the boy's thigh from behind as he started to speak, then flashed a polite smile.
“Well, what do you think...?”

“I understand. I apologize for the sudden request.” Raising himself from his seat, Raemos bowed deeply.
“But please, accept it. I beg you...” Riot also gave a clear silent bow.
That night, dessert was not served.

“You know what I mean, Justice? I'm not keen on this request.”
“But...”
“Just listen to me.” Riot rolled over in bed. The church bed Pablo had prepared creaked strangely in the darkness. “We're going to be working with the church. They'll treat us like outsiders... To put it bluntly, they'll treat you like the enemy. There's no way we can get along with people like that.”
“...Maybe.”
“I'd say definitely. And besides...” The warrior demon sighed and spoke at the same time. “I hate those council members.”
From the bed next to hers, Justice asked sympathetically, “You don't trust Raemos either?”
“You think I'm suspicious, don't you? But I've been deceived many times by those in power. And...” Her voice sounded like a confession. “The ones who did this to my body... were the council members of my country. I don't think they're the same... but they look the same to me. I'm sorry.”
“It's okay. More importantly...” Justice sat up in bed and reached out to Riot. “Don’t think so bad about your body. Riot, you have saved me so many times. I think your body is amazing.”
“Dumbass...” Burying her face in the pillow, Riot burst out laughing. “Even if you're my comrade-in-arms... you don't just tell a girl you that you ‘like her body’.”
“Really?... Am I weird?”
“Yes,” Riot nodded, squeezing the boy's small hand. Even in this darkness, Justice's hand had found him without fail. It was strangely warm.
“...Then, can I tell you what I think?”
“Yes, please.”
Quietly, Justice smiled. “I'll cooperate with them. If there's anything I can do... I want to help.”
Riot squeezed his hand tightly and asked again. “Didn’t you hear what I said...”
“Of course I heard you. But...” Justice squeezed the girl's hand back. “Even children were killed. I don't think they did anything wrong. But they were killed. I can't forgive that.”
“Just leave it to the church people here.”
“I'm a Holy War Officer. I heard there's an evil spirit at work, and I absolutely cannot ignore that.”
"The chances are high that YOU won't get any cooperation. They have no reason to accept."
“They have no reason to refuse either. Surely you wouldn't turn a blind eye, Riot?”
“You've got to be kidding...!” As Riot started to speak, the boy laughed mischievously in the darkness. Even though he couldn't see it, that warm smile spread through Riot's chest.
“You're sneaky, Justice.”

With a look of disgust, Riot threw herself face-down onto her pillow. “You think if you smile like that, I'll take it on, don't you? You're such a nasty kid...” The warrior demon scratched her bright red hair. Smiling at her irritation, Justice asked again.
“So, you'll take it on?”
Riot clicked her tongue in annoyance. “...Fine.”
“Are you sure? Really sure?”
“But... I'm not taking it on willingly. I'm just not turning a blind eye, okay?” Riot smiled wearily. Justice made up her mind... That alone was enough to satisfy her partner.

The next morning, Riott and the others visited Raemos at the camp spread out on the outskirts of Rio Robo Village. That said, it was just a grassy field. More than twenty covered wagons were lined up neatly - and at the camp, more than a hundred holy knights were carrying out their respective duties. Some were engaged in morning training, some were offering prayers, some were on guard duty... Everyone gave the unfamiliar Holy War Officer Justice a holy knight salute. They appeared to be a well-trained, disciplined bunch.
“They seem like a select, first-rate unit,” Riot whistled in admiration.

“The Holy Church is really serious about this operation...”
Just from the soldiers' every move, Riot accurately assessed the unit. Even though they were still at camp, the unit was tense - that could be felt just from the movements of the Holy War Officers. The few Holy War Officers who passed by weren't particularly surprised to see outsiders. They gave only a slight nod and remained absorbed in their duties.
(Ah, so this is a typical Holy War Officer...)
Noting their lack of friendliness, Riot recalled the boy who had gone ahead.
By nature, Holy War Officers occupy an absolutely superior position within the Holy Church. Just as Holy Knights are chosen knights, Holy War Officers are chosen priests.
And Holy Warriors are the only ones in this world with the power to overcome the Evil Spirits... the ones who wield miracles. The Holy War Staffs they carry are not mere symbols of status. The rare gemstone, Metalite, set upon their tips is the medium that summons the power of the Creator God, Aeolus.
The ones who fight with the power of the Creator God to exterminate evil spirits – the Holy Officers. They intensify their concentration and undergo rigorous training to be able to instantly activate the complex wording of miracle summons. Above all, they maintain an unshakable faith. Only one in tens of thousands of Holy Believers could become a Holy Warrior. They naturally had a sense of being the chosen ones, and were sometimes pretty arrogant about it.
Justice was one of them.
But her partner, the boy, showed no sign of being an elite. Feeling Justice's difference as compared to the other officers once again, Riot walked on through the grasslands.

“I've made the arrangements.” Raemos was leading the way, weaving between the covered wagons. Justice and Riot followed behind the councilor. “But first, I would like you to meet the commander.”
“The commander of the investigation unit, right? What is his name?”
When Justice asked, the councilor pointed to the covered wagon ahead. “That's him. Holy War Officer Warden...” Around the particularly large covered wagon, holy knights were busily working. It looked like a temporary command center.
In the center, a man stood up from a wooden box. He wore a white holy robe with composure and slowly turned his gaze toward them.
“Lord Raemos, are those the two you mentioned...?”
Raemos nodded magnanimously to the man with the low voice. Then he introduced them. “This is Lord Warden, Holy War Officer of the Holy Church of Vaslan.”
He was a tall, thin-faced Guyanese man in his mid-thirties. His gold-rimmed glasses gave him an unusually cold impression. He too, like Justice, gripped a Holy War Staff.
“Nice to meet you, Mr. Warden.” The surrounding Holy Knights saluted him as well. Justice stepped forward, smiling and extending his hand. But the greeting was ignored. Instead, Warden looked askance at Raemos.
“You're still just a child...!” Holy War Officer Warden looked down at Justice, then glanced at Riot. “And I didn't even think you were a woman. Are these two really reliable?”

“But of course...” Raemos puffed out his chest confidently. “Yesterday, the village chief reported that they exterminated the mutant beast Gzurlun along with its nest. There's no doubt they can be relied upon.”
“Well then, that's good...” Warden continued without lowering his voice. “Failure of the operation will not be tolerated. If they're going to be a hindrance, it's better not to take them.”
A small explosion of anger erupted in Riot's chest. Warden's words showed no restraint or consideration. The veins around her temples nearly burst. (What the hell is wrong with this guy...?) But she calmed himself and observed the commander.
His complexion was strangely pale. His expression was rigid, not moving an inch. Tension was evident in his voice. Mountains of documents and countless medicine bottles were scattered around him. To anyone watching, Warden clearly appeared to be in the midst of an insane workload.
(Seems his mind is completely consumed by the operation...) Suppressing her frustration, Riot frowned and whispered to her partner.
“He sure is blunt, isn't he... right in front of us...”
“Ri-Riot...”
The Armored Demon spoke deliberately loud enough to be heard. Yet showing no sign of being flustered, Warden turned back to his two collaborators.
“Ah... My apologies. I am sorry if my attitude offended you. I'm just a bit tired...” Exhaling wearily, Warden extended his hand once more.
“Holy War Officer Justice, and War Armor Demon Riot. Well then, nice to meet you. This will be a dangerous mission, but I hope you'll cooperate.” He said again in an emotionless voice. “Hmm, I wonder what to do...”
Riot turned away as they shook hands. “Thanks to you guys, I missed out on a feast last night. I don't feel like cooperating...” Riot countered with an annoyed tone.
“Come on, Riot...”
“But that's not how it is,” Warden said, offering a faint, slightly apologetic bow. “I'm truly sorry... It's not that I don't trust you. But this operation... If you can't be effective combatants, it'll cause us trouble. And it'll cause you trouble too... I was just worried about that.” He chose his words carefully, apologizing awkwardly.
Riot tried to understand this man whose expression never changed. He was competent, but probably terribly bad at socializing. He gave off no emotion whatsoever. And his sunken cheeks spoke of his fatigue and heartache. Perhaps the heavy responsibility of the operation left him no room to spare for those around him.
Riot felt a slight pang of sympathy.
“Don't worry about it, Mr. Warden.” Justice smiled, as if he understood. “It's only natural for pilgrims to cooperate with the local church. We'll help with anything.” The boy pointed at his partner and said happily, “Besides, Riot is... the strongest person around, second to no other battle armor demon! She'll definitely be useful, I can guarantee it.”
“Who the hell do you think you are, vouching for me...?” Riot scratched the back of his neck, looking annoyed.
“Fine, fine. If the Holy War Officer bows his head to me, I guess I have no choice. We'll settle for five thousand dollars a day, meals included, and free ammunition.”
“I appreciate you saying that.” Warden thanked him simply, but still without emotion.

“We, the New World Crusaders... Holy Warriors and Holy Knights, have a duty to fight evil spirits and their blood allies as well as protect the citizens. Please consider this part of your sacred duty and cooperate with us.”

Riot smiled wryly at the half-hearted encouragement. Justice looked up at that smile with a puzzled expression.

“What's so funny, Riot? Did I say something weird?”

“You didn't say it, you see.”

Whether he could be relied upon or not, now it was Riot's turn to worry about the commander - but she had already made him say “I'm sorry” twice. For Riot, that was enough.

“Oh, a newcomer?” A suddenly cheerful voice called out to the smiling Riot. Turning around, she saw a silver-armored knight standing there. The black-haired knight, carrying a long sword, approached the group, flashing his yellow teeth.

“It seems you've gained Lord Warden's approval. Well done, well done... Good luck, do your best.”

“And who are you?”

“My apologies for not introducing myself. I am Garcia, Grand Master of the Holy Knights of the Holy Church of Vaslan.” He bowed politely and extended his right hand. But instead of shaking hands, the Holy Knight Garcia's hand slid smoothly into Riot's rear.

Justice was stunned.

But Riott raised her left arm without changing her expression. In an instant, the blade of her flame sword shot out from her wrist. Garcia jumped back and rubbed his chin dramatically. “Whoa, you really are a battle armor demon! Nice sharpness, just right for shaving!”

“N-Next time I'll take your head!” Strangely flustered, Riot whimpered. “You’re a Holy Knight Commander! Not just some pervert in shiny armor!”

“How else am I supposed to greet someone? Skin contact, skin contact.”

“Who gave you permission for skin contact?!”

But between the two, Justice was fighting off dizziness. “Let's stop this, Riot... Fighting here like this...”

“It's not a fight, he's the one at fault.”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm the one at fault. This hand of mine.” Grinning, Garcia casually patted Justice on the shoulder. “Well, someday you'll understand too. Wonderful things are surprisingly close at hand.”

“What wonderful things?”

“Your plump partner, for example...”

Just as Riot was about to swing her Flame Blade again...

“Enough, Captain!” With a shout, a girl stepped forward nimbly.

A girl... though she was a Holy Knight. Like Garcia, she wore silver armor and carried a long sword at her wais - but what was most striking was her wavy golden hair. Even in the night, it was vivid, reaching down to her waist and swaying dynamically.

The female holy knight stood before her superior, her gaze flashing with intensity.

“Is that the attitude you show to other Holy War Officers?! And you haven't even said your morning prayers yet!”

“Oh, it's just you, Alena.” Waving his hand dismissively, Garcia leapt back from the knight. “Physical contact with women is my hobby. You should remember your superior's preferences.”
“I would rather forget about them.” Exasperated, the knight called Alena sighed. Her stern expression softened for a moment. She had unexpectedly cute features.
“But you've come at a good time. Starting today, these two will be joining us as helpers. Take care of arranging carriages and other things for them.”
“Understood. Leave it to me.” Arching her chest and nodding, Alena turned her gaze to the newcomers. Justice still looked uneasy, while Riot looked dissatisfied. But...
“I am Holy Knight Alena. Pleased to meet you.” After giving a holy knight salute, the female holy knight winked at Justice.
“You must be Holy War Officer Justice? As rumored, you are quite cute.”
“Eh, eh...?” Looking up at the tall Alena, Justice blushed. Riot curled her lips at the overly familiar Holy Knight.
“There aren't any decent Holy Knights around here...”
“Oh dear, are you jealous? My apologies.”
“What did you say?!” Riot's blood boiled at Alena sticking out her tongue. Garcia grinned and let out a loud burp.
“Well then, nice to meet you all. By the way, when you take a bath, Lord Riot, be sure to let me know, okay?”
“Understood, Captain Pervert!” She said with a smile.
Only Warden, perhaps accustomed to this, ignored the group and sat back down on a wooden box. “Departure is the next morning, at 5:00 standard time. Set your watches. Further instructions will follow. Until then, both of you, stand by.”
“We'll do our best.”
“Cesia should be in Car 18. Get a set of daily necessities from her. That's all.”
The female holy knight took Justice and Riot's hands and squeezed them firmly. “Here we go, this way!”
“A-Alena-san, not so suddenly...!”
“Hey, you...!”
Hurriedly bowing, Justice hastily left the scene. While being dragged away by Alena, Riot stuck his tongue out at Garcia. The Holy Knight showed no reaction.
And finally... the commotion subsided.
“Did I... do something unnecessary?”
Garcia gave Raemos, who asked timidly, a nasty laugh. “No, this is a dangerous mission. The more heads, the better. Besides...” He stared at the three figures receding into the distance with a lecherous voice. “...the woman is quite a catch.”
“Don't be ridiculous. Assign them to security.” Warden looked down at his documents and uttered in a tired voice. “And don't cause any trouble with them. It'll interfere with the mission.”
“I like strong-willed women, you see.” Garcia neither agreed nor disagreed, simply staggering away from the spot.
Suddenly, Warden adjusted his glasses. “Pilgrim Justice...” It was a name he had heard somewhere before. He couldn't quite remember where. Well, never mind, he decided, and returned his gaze to the pile of documents.
A dark red, ominous cloud swirled within the thick rain clouds. It was a bad omen.

“Once again... I am Holy Knight Alena. Pleased to meet you, Justice!” Bowing, the female knight grasped Justice's hand. Her smile was dazzlingly healthy.
“Ah, the pleasure is mine.” Even the affable Justice was intimidated. Or rather, he had never seen anyone so clear-eyed.
The same was true for Riott. After exchanging handshakes, the three began walking through the camp.
“How much have you heard about us?”
“You’re known as The Holy Crusader and the Armored Demon. That's all.” She replied to Riot in plain language. Alena pointed hatefully at the command center receding in the distance. “You saw him, didn't you, Lord Warden! Do you think that expressionless stick-in-the-mud would explain the details to a lowly holy knight like me?”
“True... Then what about Garcia?”
“Just a lecherous old man!” She snorted and declared it flatly. “He may look like that, but he's a master of the Sarg-style sword technique... The Vaslan Holy Knight Order has a bad reputation because of him. What a nuisance!”
Riot laughed defiantly and observed this eccentric holy knight for a moment.
Holy Knights are warriors selected from among many knights based on their combat skills and faith, sent to fight against evil spirits. They are also permitted to possess weapons special-made for exterminating evil spirits. They are, so to speak, the elite of the Holy Church. It is said that many people buy their status with money these days, but that wouldn't be true of Alena. She was such a charming girl that she felt that way just from meeting her.
Justice seemed to feel the same way, as he regained his usual smile. “We're leaving tomorrow morning, right?”
“Yes. Once we pass this here village, Rio Robo, it's nothing but wilderness all the way to the village of Warun. This is the last supply point on the way. The road will probably become impassable for covered wagons.”
Treading through the undergrowth, the three made their way through the camp.
"In that case, we'll have to walk to the ruins of Warun Village. I know it will be troublesome for you, Holy Officer Justice, but I ask for your understanding."
“Please, just call me ‘Justice’.” Justice looked up at Alena's face. “I am still immature. Moreover, I do not belong to the church here. It's fine to call me by my name.”
“But how can I call a Holy War Officer by his first name!”
However, Riot gave Alena's surprised shoulder a light pat. “If he says it’s fine, then it’s fine. Just go along with it. I get thrown off when my partner refers to me by my full title and all.”
“It really is fine, Arena-san.”
“W-well, if you say so...” Alena tilted her head, staring intently at this strange pair. “I'm starting to feel out of sorts too.” Muttering as if in resignation, Alena led the two to a covered wagon.
The wagon, pulled by two Logta horses, was surprisingly large. Laundry and cooking utensils were piled high around it. “I'm sorry. Since you two are not part of the official count, you'll have to travel in this wagon used for daily life.”
“It's fine, don't worry about it.”

Taking Justice's words, Arena went around to the back of the covered wagon. There, she saw the back of a girl washing countless cooking dishes one after another.
“There, there... Hey, Cesia.” But even when Arena called out to her, the hands washing the dishes didn't stop. Seeing her back, completely absorbed in her work, the three of them cautiously crept closer.
“Hey, Cesia!”
“Kyaaaah!” Tapped on the shoulder in the darkness, the dishwashing girl jumped up with a scream. She ran forward and threw herself into Justice's chest.
“Waaah!” Justice dropped his Holy War Staff and held the girl in his arms.
In that instant, the scent of her hair tickled the boy's nose.
She was a slender girl wearing a simple apron. She wore no jewelry and appeared to be completely free of makeup - however, her flaxen hair, swaying at her shoulders, was full of a smooth shine. Her cool eyelashes were long, and her lips were a faint red.
“What the hell are you doing, Cesia!” Laughing loudly, Alena pounded Riot's shoulder with all her might. Riot frowned, looking annoyed.
“Is this the girl Warden was talking about?”
“Yes, it's Cesia! She's my best friend! Come on, Cesia! Say hello to them!”
Staring intently at Justice, the girl's face turned bright red and she jumped back. At that moment, she kicked the dishes at her feet. While gathering the scattered plates, the girl bowed her head. “I'm so sorry! My name is Cesia...”
“Ah, ah... I'm Justice. Nice to meet you.”
The boy also began to help pick up the plates, looking flustered. Then, Justice's butt knocked over another pile of plates.
Riot sighed and muttered. “You two are like two peas in a pod.”
It was a sudden and hectic night, full of various encounters.

【Chapter 2: Nevoa Wetlands / Assault】

“We’re departing!” At the command of Holy War Officer Warden, the covered wagon train began to move in an orderly fashion.
“Thank you for everything!” Leaning out from the driver's seat of the covered wagon, Justice waved and waved.
Rio Robo Village was already far below. But the villagers, including Pablo, bowed their heads repeatedly to the covered wagon train climbing the steep mountain road. It was still early morning, before the sun had risen. Even so, many children ran after the wagon, reluctant to say goodbye.
“Thank you, Justice!”
“Big sister, come back again!”
Although she noticed she had been called, Riot remained crouched on the wagon. But she wasn't feeling bad. Rather, she felt deeply relieved. She hadn't been discovered in this village...
“They're very grateful to you...” Riding her black Balmon horse, the Holy Knight Alena marveled. She brought her beloved horse close to the covered wagon and smiled at the driver. “You two must have done something really good.”
“Y-Yes...” Cesia nodded slightly and tightened the reins.

A convoy of more than twenty covered wagons. Justice and the others were riding in the wagon near the very end of the line. Cesia guided the horse with practiced ease as they climbed the muddy mountain path. Beside her, Justice exclaimed in admiration.

“You're really good with the carriage. Logta horses are temperamental—it's tough for a girl to handle them.”

“She's quite skilled, you know.” Alena puffed out her chest proudly. “She's actually Lord Warden's secretary. Still an apprentice, but... she can do anything, so she gets stuck with all sorts of errands. Right, Cesia?”

“Yeah...” The taciturn Cesia drove the carriage onward in silence. From the cargo bed, Riot took another look at her profile.

She was nothing short of lovely. Probably around twelve years old. Not flashy or stunningly beautiful. Yet, strangely, she radiated an aura of pure innocence. Her slender frame, pale skin, and faint, almost vanishing voice all made her seem like a fragile work of art. Would she even be able to stand without support? Such a worry welled up inside her. She was the kind of girl you wanted to protect.

(If I had a sister like this... But if I did... I'd surely worry about her and stay by her side constantly. I'd definitely brag about her to my friends. If she clung to me, I'd dote on her like crazy.) Having imagined that far, she sneered at herself once more.

Happiness existed only in the world of imagination.

“We're quite the contrast, aren't we?” Riot said to Alena from the cargo bed, stretching widely.

“Well, that's how best friends are, I guess.”

“Yes, exactly! Just like you and Justice!”

“What do you mean?”

“A stark contrast between clumsiness and refinement!”

“You're one to talk,” Riot laughed in amazement, leaning back against the large barrel.

Ever since meeting her last night, she found herself relaxing around Alena. Jokes came naturally, and smiles appeared. This rarely happened.

(Even I have become more cheerful.) She thought to herself. Thinking about what she had been doing a year ago, how she had been feeling, filled her with dread. Those had been days of blood and gunpowder smoke - but meeting one boy had changed all that. The people around her might not notice, but, certainly, many of the wounds in Riot's heart had been covered and healed.

Shivering in the early morning chill, Riot silently watched her partner's back.

“What a terrible road!” Justice shouted from the rattling driver's seat. “This used to be a trade route, right?”

“Yes, until two years ago...” Cesia finally managed to string her words together. “But after the village of Warun was abandoned, no one traveled this way anymore... It seems there are a lot of mutated beasts now, and it's become an unexplored area again.”

“I guess so, with a road like this...” Justice nodded and looked around at both sides of the road. Riott followed suit and scanned the area. On both sides of the narrow mountain road, a forest continued, dark even in the daytime. It wasn't just any forest. It was a forest built on wetlands, and it was a mountain.

“It reminds me of the unexplored region of the Volboras Pass. That place was also a den of mutant beasts...” Justice muttered in a tense voice.

The New Continent is composed of eight regions.

Atlas, Roman, Volga, Saxony, Guiana, Yamato, Islam, and Afros.

The regions named after the eight ancient continents were all isolated by rugged terrain. Mountain ranges uplifted by the Ancient Catastrophe, fractured straits, and dried-up deserts remained as unexplored territories.

Areas where the atmosphere, soil, and water quality were too polluted for human habitation were also left untouched as unexplored territories. It was precisely such lands that were the source of mutant beasts. Forbidden lands.

“This one's a supply wagon, but the others are armed.” Alena scanned left and right as she explained. "Each carriage has five holy knights assigned to it, and all of them have 20mm Gatling gun mounts and flamethrowers... They also carry several anti-tank missiles."

“But we're fighting evil spirits, right?” Riot sat up and interjected. “Lower-ranked evil spirits are one thing, but when it comes to evil spirits of the Demon King rank or higher, then physical attacks are useless.”

“Oh? Even for a warrior like you, Riot?”

“That's why I'm teamed up with Justice.” Riot patted her partner on the shoulder. “In the end, the only thing we can rely on is this kid's miracles. That's why Raemos asked for our cooperation, right?”

“We don't know the enemy's strength... or even what rank the Evil Spirit is.” Alena exhaled heavily. She, too, should be equipped with weapons to fight Evil Spirits. Even so, they might not be effective against all Evil Spirits. The uncertainty seemed to spread a sense of unease throughout the covered wagon team.

“Well, we'll just have to fight.” Riot glanced at Cesia.

The little girl looked a little pale. It was understandable. She was neither a holy knight nor a holy war officer, and she didn't even have the power to protect herself. She was probably the most anxious member of the expedition.

Perhaps sensing her anxiety, Justice also gazed at the girl's profile. “Don't worry, Cesia.” The boy smiled and nodded. “I'm still inexperienced, but... I'll do my best to protect you. It'll be fine, we'll make it back to Vaslan safely. So don't worry.”

“Ah, thank you... Mr. Justice...”

“You don't need to call him ‘mister’,” Riot said from behind him, and for the first time, Cesia smiled. It was a soft, warm smile, like sunlight.

The carriage continued onward until evening. They crossed a mountain and approached the outer edge of the Nevoa Wetlands. The trade route was already buried beneath endless marshland.

“This is as far as we can go by carriage.” Warden decided to set up camp. They formed a circle with the covered wagons and set up a group of dome-shaped tents inside. By the time everything was finished, the sun had long since set.

“Next, please! Here you go...” Justice called out cheerfully from the bonfire. A large pot hung over the fire, bubbling with a stew of various vegetables. Justice dipped a ladle into the pot and served stew to the holy knights.

After all, it was a meal for over a hundred people. Although a professional chef was accompanying them, there weren't enough hands. That's why he volunteered and started helping out.

“Ah, Mr. Justice, we should be the ones...”

“It's fine, I want to help.” Ignoring the middle-aged chef's nervousness, Justice happily helped with the work. “Mr. Warden said I didn't have to do security, but I don't have any other work to do. So please, let me help with this.”

He was even wearing an apron, borrowed from Cesia, and was full of enthusiasm. The Holy Knights lining up for stew were stunned by the sight.

“Here you go. Please eat plenty.”

“Ah, ah, sorry...”

“Here, there's chicken in it too. Please.” Beside the stew, several large platters held dishes they could choose freely. Behind the platters lined up on the makeshift table, for some reason, Riot stood as the cook.

“Hey, you! Don't take so much meat by yourself! There won't be any left for the others! You over there too! One potato with butter per person!”

Around each tent, people had already started eating. Sitting on the ground, Alena had been staring in amazement at the strange actions of the food server.

“I've never seen a Warrior Demon like her before.”

“Or a Holy War Officer like that...” For some reason, Cesia murmured happily. The girl's gaze had been following Justice the whole time. Noticing this, Alena also stared enviously at her best friend's profile. But at the same time, low curses could be heard coming from somewhere in the circle.

“Is that how a Holy War Officer behaves...?”

“Pilgrims are so servile, it's disgusting...” In a sense, the insults were natural. Holy War Officers were supposed to be spoken of with reverence. Many believed that they should be respected by the Holy Knights.

As if to echo those voices, Garcia's low laughter rang out.

“Well, well... Who's that lowly servant? Why, it's none other than Justice himself!” The silver-haired Holy Knight stroked his stubble and laughed mockingly. “That ladle suits you better than your Holy War Staff. Why don't you change jobs? You'd make a fine wife!”

The laughter of the Holy Knights who followed him echoed. But Justice was laughing too. “Yes, I will, once there is peace.”

“Peace, huh? It's been a long time since that...” With that, Garcia tried to leave. But the two Holy Knights who followed him continued to laugh viciously.

“Captain, this guy really seems to be lacking something! He doesn't even realize he's being made a fool of!”

“Just punch him a little, and he'll come to his senses! Come on, come this way!”

Their voices were slurred with drunkenness. One of them grabbed Justice's arm and pulled him violently toward them. At that moment, for the first time, the boy's face contorted in pain.

“Let... let go...”

“Come on, Justice-sama!”

“Play with us!”

The surrounding Holy Knights and Holy War Officers tried to stop their comrades' actions. But faster than anyone else, an arm grabbed the drunken Holy Knight.
“He said let go!” Riot cut him off with a cutting tone. Before anyone knew it, the Battle Armor Demon was gripping the holy knight's wrist. Riot flashed a low, intense gaze at the holy knights. “Didn't you hear me? Let go. It's an order from Holy War Officer Justice... Drunken holy knights should just shut up and obey orders.”
The surrounding holy knights fell silent at his murderous tone. Both Arena and Sesia froze, still standing with their hips raised. But the Holy Knights whistled, welcoming his appearance.
“Oh my... Lord War Armor Demon Riot has arrived!”
“Well, what can we do! Let's retreat!”
“Justice is kind, but it seems you are harsh!”
“That's right”, one of them said finally. “She's a warlord who's taken tens of thousands of lives on battlefields all over the place. Nuclear weapons, poison gas, biological weapons... There's no way we can win if she spreads that stuff around.”
Then he grinned, his lips twisted.
“Just touching her might contaminate us...”
“Whoa, that's not good!” The holy knight whose arm was grabbed made a fuss, acting silly. It was an ugly smile. The moment he thought that, Riot quickly twisted his wrist upward. Before he could scream, Riot swept his legs out from under him.
“You bitch! The hell are you doing?!” The other holy knight put his hand on his long sword. “How dare a mere machine rebel against His Holiness the Holy Knight! Know your place!”
(That’s it.) Hearing a line she heard countless times in her life, Riot reflexively reached for her gun. There was no hesitation. She instantly judged them deserving of death.
But the Holy Knight who shouted was swiftly struck with an open palm. Faster than the Battle Armor Demon, Justice delivered a furious blow.
“I am not your superior...” Justice said resolutely. “Therefore, I have no right or qualification to give orders... but I will say this much. Riot is a much more admirable person than you... She is not someone to be mocked by you!”
“Guh...!” The Holy Knight was speechless at the sound reasoning.
Riot also relaxed her hand that had been reaching for her gun. Her anger vanished in an instant. Justice's words had that much power. However, the pinned Holy Knight was still writhing pitifully on the ground.
“C-Captain! Help me!”
“Oh? If you're going to move like that, then I'll do this.”
Riot completely immobilized the Holy Knight with just one hand on his wrist. The Battle Armor Demon brushed her bangs back and turned to face Garcia. “Sorry, but I'm not stupid enough to use nuclear weapons on the likes of you. This is enough. If you still want to do it, then go ahead and draw.”
Riot reached for the greatsword on his back. “But you'll be the ones regretting it.”
Just as Garcia was about to say something... a single cough broke the tension.
“I'm hungry. Give me some food.” Warden stood impassively in front of the stew pot. For a moment, Garcia looked at him, then Justice ran back to his original position.
“Sorry, just a moment...” With that one word, the group dispersed. Riot also released his grip on the Holy Knight's wrist.

“Warden, this guy!”
“You're the one who started the fight, Leroy. And you drank without permission too.”
Staring at the stew, the Warden declared.
“You are ordered to fast for two days until combat operations begin. Go over there.”
“What the hell, you idiot!” Garcia's grumbling voice faded away as he departed in the covered wagon. The tension dissipated.
“Garcia's subordinate was at fault just now...” Taking the stew, Warden announced in a stiff voice. But you're at fault too. I told you not to guard me, but I didn't tell you to serve my meals. No holy knight would obey a holy war officer who lacks dignity.”
“It's true, I lack dignity...” Justice bowed his head in a voice that sounded remorseful. “It may be my fault that I caused this unnecessary conflict. But I have no intention of making you all obey me... Is that wrong?”
“You can say that because you're on an easy pilgrimage. Holy War Officers belonging to the church are different.” Warden took some boiled vegetables from a large plate and muttered slowly. “Sometimes you have to send your subordinates into deadly situations. Sometimes you are sent into deadly situations yourself. At times like that, it's important to build a master-servant relationship where you can die with peace of mind. You wouldn't understand...”
“Oh, really?” Riot piled a large serving of boiled vegetables onto her plate and smiled brightly. “I could die for someone important to me, you know. I'm convinced of it. But it's not a master-servant relationship. YOU wouldn't understand.”
Hearing this, Justice looked up at his partner happily, but Riot quickly looked away from his innocent gaze.
“It's not for your sake, you know. First of all, I want to live a long life!”
“Nonsense.” Warden sighed and turned away. “It's always the ones who say they can die who can't. Well, never mind... Just don't cause any more trouble.”
“I'm sorry, Warden.” He bowed his head and regained his smile. He still lacked dignity. But Riot was now convinced that he was the best Holy War Officer there was.

Early the next morning, Justice and Riot were summoned to the command post.
Tables were lined up in front of a particularly large tent. When they arrived, led by Alena, the discussion had already begun.
“The village of Warun is fifteen kilometers ahead.” Pointing to an old paper map, Warden looked around at everyone. “We are going out on a reconnaissance mission now. It is, so to speak, an advance party. I will be in command.”
“You yourself, Lord Warden?”
“Well, I don't know about that...” Raemos and Garcia spoke up at the same time. “Lord Warden, you are effectively the commander-in-chief. If anything were to happen to you, it would hinder our subsequent operations. Shouldn't we leave the advance party to Lord Garcia?”
The senior holy knights nodded in agreement with Councilor Raemos' words. But Warden shook his head and looked away. “In case of an emergency, Garcia will take command. At present, we have no information on the enemy, so it is necessary for me, as commander, to go to the front lines and assess the situation. Besides...” Warden pointed at the two who had just arrived. “Justice and Riot will join the advance party. That is why Garcia will not be included.”

All eyes turned to the two of them. Justice straightened his back at the sudden nomination.
"U-us...?"
"That's fine, but why?" Riot said, fighting off sleepiness. Warden stared at them and continued.
"I don't know the combat capabilities of you two. I want to put you into actual combat early and see how you do. And I don't think it will work well under Garcia's command... That's my honest opinion."
"You're never honest." Riot smiled and looked at his partner. Justice was already nodding vigorously.
"We're happy to join, Warden. Now give us our orders."
"Depart in one hour. Gather ammunition, food, maintenance supplies, and anything else you need. Don't be late." Rolling up the map, Warden made the sign of the cross with his holy seal. The holy knights followed suit.
"Return safely..." Riot nodded deeply at Raemos' voice. Justice also made the sign of the cross without a word. "Show them what you've got."
Garcia also stood up, looking annoyed. At those words, the two left without a word.

The advance party was hastily organized. Besides Warden, there were three Holy War Officers. Including Alena, there were nine Holy Knights. And then there were Justice and Riott. The advance party of fifteen heads gathered at the supply wagon to prepare their equipment.
"Hey, Justice..." Riot looked down at her partner with an exasperated voice. Justice was stuffing sweets into his small backpack one after another.
"We're not going on a picnic! Pack something more filling and nutritious!"
"But humans need sugar too." Justice pouted his lips in dissatisfaction. "And sugar activates the brain. So I'm taking this too." He held out a cake studded with countless pieces of fruit preserved in honey.
Suppressing a wave of nausea, Riot grimaced. "You're nothing but sugar..."
"But Cesia made it especially for me... Right, Cesia?"
She answered softly, "Yes," and blushed. "I heard that Mr. Justice likes sweets, so..." Her bashfulness was very girlish. It was also natural. Something that Riot could never manage.
"I told you, you don't need to call me 'sir'..."
"Oh, I'm sorry, Miste… r…" The exchange between the two brought smiles to the faces of the surrounding holy knights. It was heartwarming to see.
Beside them, Warden was giving instructions to the Holy Knights one after another. He quickly read out the necessary equipment. A line of equipment was soon formed beside the covered wagon. "All right... This should be enough."
"Ah, Mr. Warden, there's still..." Cesia ran up onto the cargo bed and brought back more equipment. "Please bring another... twenty meters of rope. I hear the waterways around here are surprisingly wide. Also, two more colors of signal flares... to signal serious injuries and contaminated persons. And stomach medicine... just in case..." It was indeed the kind of arrangement one would expect from a secretary.
Riot was amazed at her meticulous consideration, which was different from when she dealt with Justice. "Cesia is a worrier."

Warden exhaled softly and nodded. “All right, if you say so, I'll take them.”
“I'm sorry for adding to your load.”
“No... Thank you for your hard work.” Warden patted Cesia's small shoulder. Cessia smiled back, looking somewhat relieved.
“Hmm...” Riot pretended to be impressed, making sure Warden could hear her.
“Even you say thank you, huh?”
“Cesia does a good job.” Warden's expression turned cold again in an instant, and he adjusted his glasses with his finger. “Besides, she's still an apprentice. I can be strict with her after she's appointed as my official secretary.”
“Cesia is your favorite, after all!” Alena chimed in from the side, poking her best friend's back with her fingertips. “But Cesia's favorite is Justice, right? Wow, what a love triangle!”
“Oh, Alena!” The two girls giggled and ran around the covered wagon. But Warden was no longer looking at Cesia.

“Let me make this clear from the outset: you are now under my command.” The Holy War Officer turned to Justice and Riott and declared. “All subsequent actions are to be carried out according to my orders. Is there any objection?” Warden's voice was still tense. The signs of fatigue were growing even more pronounced.

“Understood...” Justice nodded, as if he had made up his mind.

Riot also took a deep breath and looked at the commander. “All right, let's see what you've got... Make sure you use Justice's power properly.”

“All right,” Warden said. Flipping his white holy armor, the commander called the other holy warriors together.

At least he's not the worst. Riot was beginning to think so. Perhaps he's just the worst to deal with.

The sky had been covered in a light gray color since early morning. The sun should have been at its zenith, but its rays were blocked by a sea of clouds. The surroundings were nothing but endless wetlands, a seemingly endless landscape. The fifteen-man advance party entered the wetlands in five canoes.

The old trade route was submerged. But after traveling more than ten kilometers along the winding waterway, an elevated plateau appeared ahead. The hills covered with dark trees were the site of the former village of Warun.

“Get out of the canoes. We'll go on foot from here.” At Warden's command, the group stepped onto solid ground for the first time in five hours. “Split into three teams and spread out. Keep fifty meters between each team. Two of you follow me.”

Justice and Riot joined Warden in the central formation. Leading the way were three Holy Knights, including Alena, and one Holy War Officer. Four similar groups were deployed to the left and right.

(I see...) Riot watched the commander's back and felt a slight sense of admiration. Warden had probably received basic military training. The marching formation was flawless. It was a boring choice, straight out of the manual, but at least it showed he wasn't stupid.

“Keep your footsteps quiet. Proceed with caution.” Keeping their heads down, the fifteen entered the deep forest. It was an extremely unpleasant forest. The air was thick with humidity, the ground muddy beneath their feet. A foul stench hung in the air, as if gas were seeping from somewhere - yet the trees stretched their branches robustly, completely blocking out the scarce sunlight. It felt like stepping into a damp cave.

“What on earth possessed them to build a village in a place like this...” Riot muttered under her breath. “They say it was abandoned two years ago... but wasn't it uncharted territory even before that?”

“They've always said this Nevoa Marshland holds a massive natural gas deposit...” Glancing around, Warden swallowed hard. “It was a settlement for pioneers trying to extract it... though their efforts failed, of course...”

Riot turned her gaze to Alena, the guide. The female knight crouched low, deftly weaving through the thickets. Not a single branch stirred.

“She's good, isn't she...”

“I've also sent Alena to local warfare school.” Warden murmured with satisfaction.

“She specializes in combat in mountainous and forested areas. That's why she's our guide.”
In the trees, the strange bird calls continued to echo. Justice looked up suddenly and let out a small gasp.
“Th-that's amazing, Riot...”
But even without being told, the Battle Armor Demon had already noticed. Right in the middle of the forest, a huge spire had suddenly appeared. Roughly fifty meters tall. For some reason, it was a metal tower that rose diagonally.
“This is...”
“An air cruiser. They're rare these days.” Warden sat up and exhaled. “It must have crashed here during the war right after the Ancient Cataclysm. Easily over a thousand years old.”
Riot had heard of it too.
Back when the New Continent was still the Eight Continents, people traveled between them using anti-gravity devices. Naturally, they were also used in war. That relic lay before them, moss-covered, tangled in vines, exposing its pitiful remains.
“The village is close now. Alena, avoid that rocky area on the right, it's at two o'clock.”
“Yes!”
Without even looking at a map, Warden stated with certainty. All three teams corrected their course at once.
“Mr. Warden, you seem to know this place very well.” Justice spoke with respect. “It's as if you've been here before.”
“I have, actually. Two years ago.” Warden stated matter-of-factly, without emotion. “I was the one who destroyed the village of Warun with my own hands.”
“What do you mean...?” Justice asked timidly. But Warden didn't hesitate, stepping over the fallen tree.
“Chemical weapons from the Eight Continents era were discovered nearby and infected the villagers. If we had hesitated, there was a risk it would spread to other villages. I took command and burned the entire village.”
“The entire village?” Riot stopped in her tracks. Warden, however, continued forward without concern.
“It was a village of about two hundred people. The High Council at the time decided it was better than leaving them and having ten thousand die... I led the execution squad... That was when I came here.”
“You say it so casually.” The Armored Demon said, coldly. “The villagers couldn't have accepted being burned alive.”
“Death is... well, that's how it is. No one accepts death willingly. Especially on this... New Continent.” Warden brushed aside the vines overhead. "But I accepted killing two hundred people. I followed my convictions. I still don't think I was wrong. I do feel sorry for them, though..."
Riot fell silent at those words.
Riot was no saint, not enough to be blamed for the sin of killing people. She himself had killed more people on the battlefield than anyone else, and she had no convictions about war. Warden, who killed people according to his own sense of justice, was probably better than her.
“It was a nasty job, wasn't it...” Immediately after muttering this, Justice gasped.

At the same time, Warden and all fifteen members of the advance party tensed. The five Holy War Staffs held by the five Holy War Officers. They all emitted a red light at once. They had detected the approach of the rare gem Metallite Magic.
Warden shouted quickly. “All units, halt! Find cover at your current location!”
Directly above the trees, the wind speed rapidly increased. The entire forest trembled, and birds fled in a frenzy. The atmosphere instantly turned lukewarm.
“Riot...!”
Pulling Justice, who had rushed over, close, the Battle Armor Demon reached for the great sword on her back. "I feel a tingling sensation down my spine... It's coming..."
The rustling of the treetops grew even more intense, and everyone's throats grew terribly dry.
“Something... something's there...”
“Giaaaah!”
Warden's whisper was drowned out by screams.
Riot's enemy detection function sensed a distortion in space directly ahead. Simultaneously, the retinal targeting function activated, and the Battle Armor Demon attempted to draw her greatsword.
But it was too late. The Holy Knight of the Central Squad was rising with a cry. Something had already latched onto his throat.
“Garson!” Warden and Alena called his name simultaneously. But Holy Knight Garson had no way to respond.
“Zol... Guzan... Guzanzol...” A voice that was neither language nor roar echoed around them. A red mass of flesh, as big as a man's embrace, was clamped onto his neck. A giant jaw lined with fangs as long as daggers. It had leapt out of the twisted space and torn through the Holy Knight's throat.
"It's an evil spirit... !" The moment Justice groaned, Garson's blood spattered into the air. After biting the first man to death, the enormous jaws let out a hideous, clattering laugh in midair.
“Magic discharge level 320...!” Riot activated all combat functions and assessed the enemy's strength. “It's a Knight rank! Stay sharp!” Shouting, the Battle Armor Demon drew a gun from her waist. To buy time, she fired six shots into the Demon Spirit's mouth.
“Zol... Guzan... Guzan... Zol...” The demon god's mouth made a disgusting, crunching chewing sound. It was crushing depleted uranium armor-piercing rounds like they were beans. Riot knew it, but still—physical attacks were useless against this foe.
“That won't work!” Shouting angrily, Alena drew her longsword and struck. “Leave slaying the demon spirit to the holy knights!” Alena's sword was enveloped in a faint divine light. Blades shot from her boots, slicing the airborne demon spirit diagonally. Splattering crimson-black bodily fluids, the demon spirit writhed in mad agony.
“Guzhen… Zoluzol.!" A bizarre voice made her ears ring. Undeterred, Alena swiftly swung her second blade down. Her armor grew stained with splattering bodily fluids, yet she paid it no mind, delivering the finishing blow.
Riot watched her fight with deep respect. Truly, she was a holy knight. No matter how much magic she blocked, no matter the evil spirit she slew... even wielding the

blade of sacred steel, Zodanium, there was not a shred of hesitation or fear in Alena.

And Alena had already dived into the bosom of the demon spirit, ahead of the other holy knights. She truly lived up to her role as the Warden's chosen vanguard. In one swift motion, she pierced the demon spirit's body with her longsword, cleaving it clean in two. It was a relentless, unquestioning fury.

“W-Warden!” But now, screams from the right wing crossed hers. Another demon spirit lunged at the Holy War Officer first. Its jaws clamped onto his right arm, staining the white Holy Cloth crimson.

“Aaaah!”

“Master Igsius!” The Holy Knights of the right wing swung their longswords. Sharp points pierced the massive jaws clamped onto the Holy War Officer, one after another.

“You monster!” Red-black bodily fluids spurted out like a fountain, and a mad dog-like roar shook the surroundings. The evil spirit severed half of the arm of the Holy War Officer Igsius and died before the cluster of blades.

“Justice, where are you going!?” The moment Riot noticed, the boy was already leaping over the rocks toward the right wing. Igsius, his bones shattered, let out a beast-like scream.

“Kill me! Kill me!”

“First strike...” Justice quickly formed a holy seal. “Life Transfer Healing!” The boy's Holy War Staff emitted a powerful holy light. A healing miracle was summoned to the fingers forming the holy seal, and the light rapidly flowed into Igsius's wounds.

The broken bones joined together, and flesh and tissue regenerated. In the blink of an eye, the torn-off arm had been restored to its original state.

“Oh...!” The Holy Knights of the Right Wing let out cries of admiration.

Life Transfer Healing, capable of regenerating limbs, was one of the most difficult miracles of the middle rank to master. Justice had summoned it in an instant. It was no wonder they were astonished.

“Justice, I'm sorry...!”

“The enemy is still here! Be careful!” After helping Igsius up, Justice looked around. Even after defeating the two, the Holy War Staff's alert color had not yet been lifted. Warden looked back at the Battle Armor Demon behind him.

“Riot, wh-where will they come from next!”

It was an unexpectedly shaken voice. But Riot had no time for that. The Battle Armor Demon was concentrating on catching the signs of a spatial distortion.

“Wait a moment...” Maintaining high-precision enemy detection functions consumed energy. However, Riot had also increased the rotation of the main power reactor in her chest. “...Front!” Riot stood up, shouting and pointing at the rocky area ahead.

“Alena, fall back!”

“What?!”

Riot's sharp command flew at the female knight who had turned around. “The distortion rate is higher than before! This time...” Before she could finish, the transformation manifested. “It’s a Count rank...” The warning came a split second too late.

A mountainous rock formation trembled, revealing its true form in an explosion.

“Zol...! Zeri... Teririzol...!” A monstrous jaw, vast enough to look up to, burst from the earth and lunged at the front squad.
“ALENA!” Before Riot's screaming eyes, two Holy Knights were swallowed whole in an instant. The sound of shattered bones echoed between the jaws. Lips dripping with human blood, the jaws—as large as a house—began to charge.
“Zayler! Orlov!” Calling out to her vanished comrades, Alena swung her longsword down from high above. But the Zodanium blade was deflected by lightning, and Arena's body was blown backward.
“Zol... Zeriterizol...”
It was no surprise. Even a sword made of Zodanium was an alloy with steel. Unless it was 100% Zodanium, there was a limit to which demon gods it could defeat.
“No! Bark, fall back!”
"Hiiiiiiiiiieeeeee!!!”
“Don't be reckless! Riott!” Warden's strained voice rang out. But the War Armor Demon had already drawn enormous greatswords in both hands. Kicking off the rocky ground, she leapt over the thicket and plunged into the gap between the demon god and Alena.
“Back off, Riot!” The female knight cried out in anguish, parrying the sword. “Your sword won't do it! Get out of the way!”
“I'd like to try it first!” Riot swung the sword, nearly as tall as herself, with effortless ease. In that instant, the blade erupted with a blinding holy light.
“No way...!” Before a stunned Alena, she drove the blade into the demon god's massive form from the side, as if punching it. The greatsword's strike cleaved the demon spirit, sinking into its flesh with a dull thud.
“You... how did you get Zodanium sword...!” Fluid spattered from the demon god's body. Retreating, Alena stared at Riot with an expression of utter disbelief. Leaping back from the screaming demon spirit, the Battle Armor Fiend turned to the female knight.
“Its purity should be higher than yours...” Riot crossed the two greatswords. “The twin blades of Swordmaster Zauer... Any holy knight would kill for such masterpieces!”
“N-No way! That sword should definitely be...!”
“If you think it's a lie, look again!” Kicking a fallen tree, Riot once again struck the evil spirit with a fierce blow. The thick lips split, and the evil god's charge came to an abrupt halt. The agony collapsed the bushes and toppled thick trees. There was no mistake about its power.
“Zeriteriri: Zol...!”
“Second strike...” Meanwhile, the boy's voice echoed. During Riot's delay, Justice had summoned a new miracle. Having gained sufficient time, the Holy War Officer swung his holy seal. “Sacred Flame Falling Strike!”
A belt-shaped sacred array appeared around the evil god. From the array of ancient sacred characters, flames erupted all at once. It was a relentless torrent of hellfire. Spittle and bodily fluids spilled out, and the giant lips writhed in agony. As the foul stench of burning flesh filled the air, the giant body slowly melted away on the spot.
“Impressive... for a human...”

A sacred barrier appeared around the evil god.
The miracle summoned by Justice activates!

The surviving holy knights could only groan. It was the first time they had seen the power of Justice. It was no miracle that a thirteen-year-old could summon. Everyone realized that fact.

Warden also looked at the boy. But he seemed to be trembling with fear, his voice catching in his throat. His stiff face paled even further, the color approaching panic.

Alena kept staring at the greatsword tucked into Riot's back. “You... just who are you...?”

“Just a battle armor demon... He? Just a holy war officer...” Saying this, Riot smiled.

Warden snapped back to reality, refocusing his attention on the holy war staff still radiating a warning aura. “E-Everyone, gather here! There might still be enemies lurking somewhere! Don't let your guard down!”

Riot stared intently at the commander. That momentary freeze wasn't feigned. Warden was genuinely terrified of something - but a Holy War Officer should never fear a demon spirit. Such a person shouldn't possess the qualifications to summon miracles.

(What is he afraid of...?) With that question still in his mind, she had just returned her sword to his back.

“Riot! There's still something inside...!” At her partner's shout, Riot spun around abruptly. Breaking through the charred, collapsed flesh of the demon spirit, several of the minor demon spirits from earlier burst forth. Scattering in all directions, the demon spirit leaped at Riot, spraying saliva.

“Get lost! You ugly kiss marks!” But Riot's hand missed the greatsword by a split second. The evil spirits bit into her wrists and ankles at high speed. The artificial skin was torn by fangs, and her body tissue was destroyed.
“Ah... Aaaah...!” A cry of agony escaped her. Justice reacted quickly to the sound.
“Wait, Riot! I'm coming...!”
“Don't come! You'll be in danger too!” Holding back the boy who tried to approach, the Battle Armor Demon put all his strength into her limbs.
“I can handle this much on my own...!” But the evil spirits' strength was formidable. Unable to move, Riot's flesh was torn apart.
“Riot, retreat! Get back!” Warden, unable to bear watching, shouted. But Riot's gaze was fixed on Justice running towards her. The boy Holy Warrior leaped across the rocky terrain and ran straight to his partner.
“Don't move, Riot!” The boy formed a Holy Seal as he ran. “I'll save you now! Just stay right there!”
But Riot let out a heart-wrenching plea at his actions. “Don't come near me! I'm fine!” This time, Riot's voice echoed with fear. Her panicked screams continued.
“Don't push yourself! You're already...”
“Final Strike!” Closing in, the boy swung his Holy War Staff.
Riot suddenly called out to her commander.
“Warden!” She screamed, forcing her bitten arm forward. “Use your miracle! Justice can't do it! Save me with your miracle!” But in that instant, Warden froze again. Paralyzed by Riot's voice, he stood motionless, still clutching the Holy War Staff. Before the stunned Riot, Justice summoned his miracle.
“Circumventing Shockwave!”
The explosive light sent ripples through the entire forest. The lightning bolt released from Justice's finger flew toward Riot. Then, the lightning split into four in midair. Maintaining their high speed, the four light bullets exploded on the backs of the evil spirits.
“Kyaaaah!” With death cries, the bodies of the evil spirits were blown away by the blast. Riot's body was also thrown back by the blast.
“Riot, are you okay?!” Alena held the fallen warrior tightly in her arms. But Riot pushed her hands away and scrambled to her feet.
“Justice!” She shouted, rushing toward the boy. “Justice! Hold on!”
The blond boy lay unconscious on the ground.
When the power to summon miracles is lost, Holy Warriors usually lose consciousness. Justice had exceeded his limits with his third miracle.
The silence had been broken at some point, and Warden was approaching the boy. Then suddenly...
“This...!” Realizing something, his entire body stiffened. Cold sweat poured down the Holy War Officer's neck. “Justice...!”
Riot rushed over and quickly draped his cloak over his partner... She looked up at Warden.
Their unsettled gazes met coldly. The two pairs of eyes overlapped on the back of Justice's hand. The boy's right hand, sticking out from under the cloak, emitted an eerie red light. Soon, a pattern appeared on the back of his hand, further terrifying Warden.

“The heretical symbol...!” He shouted, then fell silent. There was no one who did not know the symbol that appeared on Justice's hands. Warden, as a Holy War Officer, was not allowed to forget it.
“That's the mark of the Demon Emperor Lucifer...!”
The warrior demon hid the boy’s right hand with her sleeve. Then, silently, she shook his head.
Birds started singing again.
The wind had stopped blowing without anyone noticing.
Looking up at Warden with pleading eyes, Riot didn’t let him finish his sentence.

The midnight encampment was swallowed by silence. Not even the sound of insects could be heard tonight. Beneath a starless, pitch-black sky, the expedition team was enveloped in silence. The advance party that had returned had already suffered casualties, and the group was dominated by a gloomy mood. And the commander, wearing the most somber expression of all, knelt before someone in his private tent.
“Four more... have died...?” An old woman's voice asked from somewhere. “My deepest apologies...” Head bowed, the Warden lowered his voice. “However, the advance party was attacked by an evil spirit of the Eights rank. The casualties were kept to a minimum...”
“I suppose…” The invisible old woman sighed. “In that case... it's best we assume our enemy is an Evil God of even higher rank…”
“That is correct.” Warden lifted his head slightly and turned his gaze toward the voice.
"At this point, I must request that Lady Jikita herself take command of this operation... ...If we advance into Warun Village as is, the casualties will likely be..."
“Total annihilation, I suppose... That's troublesome.” With a laugh that sounded almost resigned, the old woman shifted somewhere. “Understood, Warden. Tomorrow, the Holy War Officers remaining here will summon the Sacred Transfer Array. We'll use that... to go provide support.”
“We apologize for the trouble.”
“But the Chairman is coming too, you know.” The old woman stated emphatically, as if to drive the point home. “Seems this incident is being condemned by the Council. They want it resolved quickly. Apparently, he wants to inspect the front lines and urge the troops on.”
“Understood.” Warden exhaled a silent sigh of relief. The tension eased just a little, his strained expression gradually softening.
The old woman sympathized with his relief. “You suffered through that incident two years ago too... Is this recent matter reminding you of the past, making you look so grim?”
“No, it’s...” The Holy War Officer faltered, and the old woman responded with a dry laugh.
“Never mind... Anything else unusual?”
“Ah, there is one thing I wish to ask...” Warden hesitated for a moment.
“Go on, tell me. What happened?”
“Hah, Lady Jikita... Did you know there's a Holy War Officer who bears the mark of the heretical sect?”

Another moment of silence. Then a mocking laugh echoed.
“What's that supposed to mean...? If such a person exists, I'd love to meet them. What of it?”
“No, nothing...” Once more, tension tightened throughout his body, and Warden shook his head. “I heard rumors about such a person in a border village... But even if you, Lady Jikita don’t know, then it must be nothing more than a rumor.”
“Interesting rumor. I'll make sure to investigate it sometime” The laughing old woman's voice gradually faded away.
“Then I'll see you tomorrow. I look forward to it.” Warden bowed low and sighed quietly. Just a rumor... Everyone would think so. But the Holy War Officer had seen something more terrifying than any rumor. Something so terrifying that he could never tell anyone... His stomach and head ached simultaneously. The Holy War Officer reached for his medicine bottle as usual.

Justice was fast asleep in the covered wagon. The boy had been breathing peacefully for over twelve hours.
Holy Knight Alena took the thermometer from under the blanket and exhaled softly. “Good... it's gone down quite a bit...”
As she murmured, the wagon creaked slightly.
“How is he...?”
“He's fine. His fever seems to have gone down.”
Hearing that voice, Riot, who had returned to the back of the wagon, breathed a sigh of relief.
“He's still just a kid... It takes a long time for him to wake up once he expends his miraculous summoning power. Same as always.”
“Was it good that I nursed him?” Arena smiled encouragingly.
“You've been scanning the area for Evil Spirits since earlier... but you keep coming back every half hour. You're worried about this kid, aren't you?”
“Hmph, don't be ridiculous.” Riot sighed, scanning the dark night. “Today, the Demon God acknowledged our existence... If that's the case, it wouldn't be surprising if this camp was attacked. That's what scares me.”
“Well... For some reason, their prey has been Vaslan Councilors and Holy War Officers... In that sense, this place is a veritable feast.”
“Their objective... Still no idea about it?”
“Lord Warden thinks we'll understand once we get there. To Warun Village...” Having said that, Arena flashed another mischievous smile. “Anyway... enough with the stinky act. I'll leave you two alone. Going back and forth is a pain, right?”
Riot pursed her lips and stuck out her tongue. “I keep checking in because I'm worried about you nursing him!”
“Cesia is coming to see him too, so it'll be fine.”
“I suppose so... I feel reassured knowing she'll be there.” Riot shifted her gaze to Justice's Holy Cloth, folded in a corner of the cargo bed. It had been soiled in battle, but Cesia had already washed it. It had been dried over the campfire.
“Well, my presence won't be of much help in nursing him. I've never done such careful washing in my life.”
“Even so, you can at least stay by Justice's side, right?” Standing up, Alena quietly climbed down from the cart.
“The senior Holy Knights has been summoned by Lord Warden. Apparently, reinforcements are coming from Vaslan tomorrow. So... I guess it's for a meeting.”
“...Thank you, Alena.” Riot timidly expressed her gratitude. “I'm sorry for bothering you all this time...”
“Don't worry about it. I'm the one who should be thanking you.” Turning her back, Alena waved her right hand. “When Justice wakes up, tell him... he was a more amazing Holy War Officer than anyone expected... Tell him everyone is grateful...”
Silently, Riot nodded. Then, after confirming Alena had left, she quietly closed the curtain of the covered wagon. Lifting the blanket, Riot stared intently at the boy's hand. The heretical mark had vanished.
A Holy Warrior's sleep was not just sleep. It was called meditation, a period of rest during which they restoreed miraculous summoning power. Normally, they were trained to be able to recover their summoning power with just one night's sleep.

(Alright, it's all good... I hope no one noticed...) Immediately after the battle, Riot wrapped Justice's body in her cloak and carried him back to camp. And for the first few hours... until the mark of the heretical sect disappeared, she stayed by his side, nursing him. More than nursing, the truth was that he wouldn't let anyone else near him. Neither Alena during the battle nor during his nursing realized this. Cesia was no different. She just thought he was exhausted.

But the problem was...

(Warden...)

Remembering the cold, weary face of the commander, Riot frowned.

Warden saw the heretical mark. But he didn't ask any questions. He left the unconscious Justice in Riot's care and, after returning to camp, arranged for the two to be isolated. But...

(What is he thinking...?)

Riot couldn't understand. The mark of a heretic was something a Holy War Officer could never overlook. It was proof of a contract between a demon spirit and a human... proof of a Blood Oath.

Since before the Ancient Catastrophe, countless humans have sold their souls to evil spirit. Blood Pacters – or Blood Allies, are wicked individuals who pay some kind of price to borrow the power of mighty evil spirits. For the Holy Church, they are the next target to be eradicated after the evil spirits themselves. They should not be overlooked.

(But why...?) Riot looked down at the sleeping face of her angelic partner. He certainly didn't look like a Blood Pact Member. In fact... Justice wasn't a Blood Pact Member. He was a genuine Holy War Officer.

(...But even if I say so, no one will believe me.) Over the past year, she had been forced to face this reality time and time again, and once more, Riot's thoughts came to a halt.

(Warden might be confused...) After a moment's contemplation, she came to that conclusion. It was inconceivable that a Holy War Officer would possess a heretical mark. Blood Allies cannot use miracles. Justice wields the power of the Creator God, so, God must have recognized him.

Then why does he have a heretical mark...

Perhaps even Warden's thoughts had come to a halt, caught in the mystery that ensnares everyone who learns the secret. It was too great a mystery to unravel. If that's the case, then Warden will...

“...Ask him directly...” As if to inspire herself, Riot voiced her decision. It was impossible to probe further into Warden's true intentions. In that case, there was no choice but to reveal the truth to him alone - and draw the true intentions out of him. No matter what it took.

(I'll try.) Riot clenched her fist as if to fight. Even if it was a wasted effort, it didn't matter. Even if Warden blamed her, it couldn't be helped. She just wanted to avoid Warden bringing everything to light, causing a hundred Holy Knights and Holy War Officers to condemn Justice.

(I'll protect Justice.) Riot quietly leapt down from the covered wagon and made her way toward the Warden's carriage. The starless night sky was cold and clear, the marshy air clinging to his skin. Returning the polite salutes of the guarding holy

knights, Riot reached the edge of the encampment. Whether the meeting with the senior holy knight was classified or not, the Warden's covered wagon had been pulled outside the circle. Numerous guards stood watch.

“Not now, then...” She hesitated, and in that instant. Suddenly, a small light strayed from the Warden's covered wagon into the night sky. It seemed lost... a wavering, feeble light.

(What... is that?)

The light, reminiscent of a glowworm, drifted toward the forest a short distance away, unnoticed by the guards. This was no natural phenomenon. It clearly moved with intent.

(Could it be... an evil spirit...!) Riot pursued the light orb, stepping into the forest. The distance was too great to measure the magical lines emitted by the evil spirit. She needed to get closer... Just as she thought this and quickened her pace.

“That's...!” She swallowed his cry in an instant. Hiding behind a large tree, Riott stared in astonishment at the light's destination.

“You came back...” Cesia smiled, her voice relieved. “I thought you might be found, but you're safe. That's good...” The girl held her palm out into the air within the forest. Upon her palm, the light rolled playfully, occasionally leaping up.

(Cesia... what on earth is she...)

The girl playing with the light orb suddenly pricked up her ears at a faint whisper. “So... you're coming tomorrow after all... Well then... I suppose I have no choice...” With that, she shook her palm from side to side. In an instant, the light sphere stretched out, transforming into a short dagger.

(No way... No way...) Riot's detection functions registered no magic at all. Yet, Cesia's actions before his eyes spoke volumes.

“I'm counting on you... Please, lend me your strength tomorrow...” Cesia clung to the dagger as if praying. Her posture could only be seen as that of a devout believer.

Yet Riot's suspicion gradually turned to certainty. Those who cling to blades will inevitably thirst for blood. Even Cesia was no exception, and the Battle Armor Demon shuddered in the dark night.

【Chapter 3: Warun Village / Entanglement】

Deep darkness filled her entire field of vision. Struggling only made the darkness cling to her skin, suffocating her breath. No matter how hard she tried, no sound came out. Summoning every ounce of strength, Riot forced her eyelids open.

(That is...) White lights stood densely packed ahead. But what appeared as light were men in white coats. All hid their faces, forming a circle, peering intently at something.

(Doctors...?) Then, a small shadow lying at the circle's center caught her eye. A young, red-haired girl, barely a child, dressed in ragged clothes...

(Ah, that's me... Me from so long ago...) The realization sent a chill through her.

Young Riott was crying, her face bright red. But the doctors around him worked silently, their hands on surgical tools.

“Can she endure it...?”

“Don't worry about it. Even if we fail, she's just a poor child.”

“We need as many Battle Armor Demons as possible...”
“That's what the Chairman said. Let’s get to it.”
Her teeth chattered and she trembled. There was no escape. No one would help her. As the memory came flooding back vividly, Riot desperately tried to resist.
But what was this...?
The doctor cut off her own right arm. A small, childlike arm, covered in blood. Her eyeball was gouged out and discarded beside her. They slit open her abdomen, and the doctors' hands fumbled around inside her chest.
(Stop... stop... stop... What did I do? Give me back my arm... Give me back my body! Put me back the way I was!)
Fighting back the rising nausea, Riot squeezed her eyelids shut. But this time, another voice reached her ears.
“Riot...........Ah, that battle armor demon?”A familiar child's voice, and overlapping with it…
“We're not friends, 'cause you're gross.”
“Yeah, creepy. And scary too.”
“What if we get on your bad side? You’ll kill us?”
She desperately covered her ears. But the voices whispered directly into Riott's mind.
“Stay away from my daughter!”
“Get on with the fight, you're the Battle Armor Demon!”
“I'm grateful, but that's all.”
She shook her head, but the voices wouldn't stop. Worse, the voice of her younger self invaded the depths of her mind.
(Mom... Mom, where are you...? Why am I the only one being bullied? Why is my body made of machines?)
Shee wanted to scream the same words. She wanted to rip off his own arms and smash them to pieces. She didn't need the prosthetic eye. She didn't need the artificial muscles. She wanted to reduce her entire body to ashes.
(I never wanted to be a Battle Armor Demon! I want to go back...! I want to start over from the beginning!)
She tore at her hair and screamed.
But her younger self's voice mocked the Battle Armor Demon.
(You can't go back now, absolutely not...)
Her eyes widened with rage.
Against the darkness, her younger self stared at Riott. A blood-soaked girl who had lost her eyes, had her arm severed, and had her belly ripped open.
She was laughing.
Terror and fury exploded.
Riot tried to pull the greatsword from his back. But her hand grasped at air.
She stared at his own hand in shock.
Riot's right arm had been severed too. Cut off at the elbow, blood spattered everywhere.
Her younger self laughed again.
Riot's scream echoed through the darkness.

“Gah...!” She screamed and jumped up. Clutching the blanket in her hand, Riot awoke to reality. Her heart was still pounding. She wiped the sweat from her brow and swallowed repeatedly.
“Are you okay, Riot?” Justice's voice came out of nowhere. Turning around, she saw the boy sitting at her bedside. Her partner looked at her with concern.
“You were tossing and turning a lot. Did you have a bad dream?”
“N-no... Not really...” Summoning his strength, Riot forced a smile.
"Chocolate and fresh cream... Then I drowned in a sea of honey. The usual..."
“That dream again? It would be a good dream for me, though...” Justice breathed a sigh of relief.
It seemed to be dawn already. The morning chill was seeping into the covered wagon. After drinking cold water from the canteen beside her, Riot wiped the sweat from her brow with her sleeve.
“More importantly, how about you... You ready to get up?”
“Yeah, I slept a lot... But...” The boy lowered his gaze once more. This time, it was Riott's turn to put a hand on his shoulder.
“Don't worry. After the battle... I hid your hand. No one saw the heretical mark.”
“Really...?”
“I'm not lying. Neither Alena nor the other Holy Knights saw it. But...” Riot toyed with the boy's blond hair. After a slight hesitation, she decided to come clean.
“Warden saw it...”
“I see... Well, I guess there's no helping it...” Justice slumped his shoulders, then forced a resigned smile. “I wanted to join the hunt for the evil spirits, but I guess I can't stay here anymore. I'll just say my goodbyes... and head south again.”
“That's not quite how it is.” Riot massaged her tired body while fixing her gaze on the boy's hand. “Warden... Haven't told anyone about that. For some reason, he kept it to himself.”
“Why... why is that...?”
"I've been meaning to ask... but I haven't yet. It's... quite difficult to ask, you see."
Justice stroked the back of his own hand. His fingertips resembled those of a white waterfowl spreading its wings. Clutching that art-like hand, the boy voiced his decision. “I... I'm going to see Warden.”
“What will you do when you see him?”
“I'll explain what I can explain. And... I'll try to explain what I can't explain. Then maybe he'll understand a little.”
“It might just confuse him more.” Riot sighed worriedly. “The Holy War Officer proudly admits that he has the mark of a heretic. And you expect people to believe that you’re not one of the Blood Allies...?”
Justice's efforts had failed countless times before. And each time, the two had lost their place to go, driven from their home. It was their fate.
“But I can't give up.” The boy grabbed his Holy War Staff and stood up firmly on the cargo bed. "Giving up means... not trusting other people. I can't do that... I don't want to."
Riot pursed her lips and nodded.

He wouldn't give up... That was why he was Justice. Even though anyone would despair in his situation, he continued to hold onto hope. That was why Riot wanted to stay with him and do something to help.
“I understand. I'll come too.” Riot once again firmly acknowledged the situation.
“We'll make them... understand. We'll keep trying until they do.”
Seeing Justice smile happily, the Battle Armor Demon also stood up. It was then that…
“Ah... Are you awake...?” The curtain of the covered wagon opened slightly, and a small girl peeked her face out. “Ah... Cesia, good morning.”
With the boy's greeting, Riott's whole body tensed up. She secretly shifted her gaze. Justice's Holy War Staff showed no reaction.
“Here's breakfast. Please eat if you like.”
“Wow, thank you. Sorry for the trouble.”
“Not at all... But Justice, how are you feeling now?”
“I slept a lot, so I'm fine. Sorry to worry you.”
“I washed your Holy Clothes...”
“You did that? I'm so thankful.” It was a peaceful, heartwarming conversation. There wasn't a hint of malice to be found. But in Riott's mind, the image of Cesia clinging to the dagger remained stuck.
“Riot, what's wrong? You look troubled...” Justice peered at her, and the warrior demon snapped back to reality.
“Nothing... I'm just amazed at your little husband-and-wife act. You're running a fever since this morning.”
“Wh-what are you talking about? Hey!” Cesia laughed at the boy playing around.
It was a cool smile, fitting for a peaceful morning.
(The Cesia I saw yesterday... Was it just a nightmare?...)
Even though she knew it wasn't, Riot tried to indulge in futile fantasies. But the Battle Armor Demon's defensive instincts would not allow her to let her guard down around the girl.
A circle of people had formed at the encampment.
Warden and Garcia were there, of course, along with most of the Holy War Officers and Holy Knights. They were all kneeling at the center of the circle.
“You've arrived...” Sensing the presence, Garcia murmured. “...The Eternal Mentor has arrived...”
The earth and air trembled. Suddenly, an ancient sacred array appeared within the circle. Emitting white light, a teleportation miracle summoned the group before them.
The entire expedition party prostrated themselves equally. Above the sacred array, a dozen figures were teleported in from Vaslan. The first to step forward was an old man with a sharp nose.
“Well done, everyone.” The old man snorted dramatically. He was a rugged-looking man with a thick beard. His sharp, hooked nose made him appear difficult to deal with and short-tempered. His blue robes were those of a councilor, like Raemos', but his garments were trimmed in gold, and his chest was adorned with a row of insignia. Chairman of the Vaslan High Council. The supreme authority governing this region was none other than him, Febres.
“Welcome, His Excellency Febres...” Warden greeted him while remaining prostrate. “We are deeply honored by your personal supervision.”

“Oh, it's nothing. I'm just bored.” With a deliberately jovial smile, Febres stepped into the camp. “The Vaslan Council just keeps hounding me about responsibility. Honestly, I needed a breather. That's why I came. Count on me.” He patted Warden's shoulder and let out a yawn. No tension, no restraint—a perfectly complacent politician's demeanor.

“This is a battlefield, you know. A holy war...” Next, an old woman clad in white holy robes stepped forward. “Taking a breather at the site where four were killed? The Council Chairman remains as carefree as ever...” She let out a dry, forced laugh.

The old woman scarcely seemed human. Several tubes dangled limply from her temples and neck. The soft tubes expanded and contracted with each breath. They were an external life support system, popular in a bygone era. Yet a gentle smile adorned her face, too. Squinting her eyes in laughter, Jikita raised a voice full of concern.

“You've been through a lot, Warden.” The old woman patted the Holy War Officer's shoulder. “Now that we're here, you can rest easy. There's nothing to worry about.”

Jikita addressed the group, her voice carrying. “Let's hunt down the evil spirits together. We'll bring peace back to Vaslan, alright?”

“Your prompt arrival... we're deeply honored.” Warden called out, exhaling a sigh of relief. “We've all been waiting with bated breath for your arrival.”

The old woman beckoned to the reinforcements of Holy War Officers who had been transported with them, raising her head to address the group. "But really, there's no need for so many gathered here. Show us to your carriage. First, let's talk there..."

Despite the tension, she wore a friendly smile.

Warden merely nodded at the old woman's words.

Jikita, Head of the Vaslan Holy Church.

She leads the Holy Church followers in this region. Having lived for over 180 years, she has held the position of Head for seventy years... She was a renowned Longevity Bearer within the Guiana region, even before becoming Head of the Church. In recognition of her long years of service, she had even been given the honorific title of Eternal Mentor. She inspires awe and respect in both the Holy Knights and the Holy War Officers.

“Well then, let's see...” Sipping her lightly brewed Zeron tea, Jikita declared from the carriage's cargo bed. “There's something at the site of Warun Village... Didn't you realize that when you were attacked? Now it's just a matter of how to attack it.” The old woman savored the tea's bitterness and let out a long sigh. Warden and Garcia knelt side by side at her feet.

"Then... This time, we'll conduct a reconnaissance in force." Warden made his decision, pointing at the map. “This time, we'll break through the defensive line in the forest... and enter the village ruins. Then we'll confirm the anomaly. First, we'll get that far...”

“Cautious, aren't you? Well, fine.” As Jikita spoke, the Holy Knight cleared his throat.

“This time, it's my turn, right?” Without any sense of tension, Garcia puffed out his chest. “I'll take half the Holy Knights with me. With that many, we should be able to reach the village.”

“Don't let your guard down. The Evil Spirit there is formidable.”

Warden rebuked the Holy Knight's flippant remark as if he feared Zikita.
“The selected advance party had a tough fight. Don’t... forget that.”
“Is that so? Among it was that brat Justice, wasn't there? He didn't seem like he'd be much help.” At that name, Chairman Febres, who had been fighting off sleepiness, sat up.
“I've never heard that name... Who is he?”
“He's a Holy War Officer on pilgrimage. I requested that he accompany the investigation team.” Raemos, who had been standing behind him, announced.
“He participated in the advance party and defeated a Count-level Evil Spirit. I believe he is quite skilled...”
Jikita's hand paused for a moment. The old woman clearly reacted to the boy's name. But without changing her expression, the church leader looked down at Warden.
"It's not good to rely on outsiders. First off, it's a disgrace to the Holy Church of Vaslan."
“Hah, my apologies...” Warden, flustered, broke out in a cold sweat.
Jikita laughed off his tension lightly.
“It's fine. I'm not blaming you. If he's useful, use him.”
“Hah, I'm sorry...”
“No need to apologize so much. But you look unusually pale, you know? Stomach trouble again?”
Warden regained a faint smile. “Just my usual ailment.”
“Must be the stress. Sorry to trouble you.” Jikita's voice softened, as if comforting a grandchild. Then, slowly, she pointed her withered finger toward the Holy Knight.
“Well, anyway... you're handing your next turn over to Garcia, right? We'll leave that one out.” Jikita set her teacup aside and sank leisurely into a shabby chair.
“This operation is one the Vaslan Holy Church will see through to success. We may borrow outsiders' hands, but we settle the score ourselves. Let's make tomorrow that day.”
“Hah...” Warden and Garcia chimed in unison. With a bored expression, Febres nodded as well.
“In that case, let's begin preparations.” The old woman pointed at Warden this time. "You, choose three Holy War Officers and bring them here. The ones going to the village tomorrow. I'll grant them a defensive miracle."
“That... is a most gracious command...” Warden knew the old woman's power. His words of thanks carried genuine weight. “Then I shall proceed immediately... With Lady Jikita's defensive miracle, we need fear no Demon God whatsoever.”
“Well, I hope so... And Garcia, you stay behind.” Ignoring Warden as she stood up, Jikita smiled at the holy knight. “I'll grant you the defensive miracle now. After that, you select the holy knights, okay?”
“Well now, that's...” Garcia grinned and clapped his hands. “If I could have it now, I'll sleep soundly tonight. Night raids are scary, you know... Thank you, thank you.”
Jikita narrowed her eyes as if comforting a poorly behaved child.
Warden simply exited. A moment of silence swept through the covered wagon.
“Now then, Raemos...” Pulling the Holy War Staff toward her, Jikita staggered to her feet from the chair.
“Hah, Archbishop... Is there something...?” Kneeling once more, the councilor raised his gaze.

Aiming for his jaw, Jikita slammed the Holy War Staff down with all her might.
“Gah... Haah!” Raemos bit his tongue, spitting blood as he fell. His body slammed against the wagon frame, and the councilor screamed in agony.
“J-Jikita-sama... What did I... do...?”
“Think about it, your incompetence...” Squeezing a roar of fury from the depths of her gut, Jikita made the Holy War Staff tremble. Gone was the compassionate old woman of moments before. Piercing Raemos with the staff, the old woman revealed a demonic visage.
“Just because we're short-handed, what the hell do you think you're doing letting outsiders in? I never gave permission for any pilgrims, you hear me!”
“I'm so sorry...” That was all he could manage to say. Broken teeth spilled from Raemos's mouth.
Febres instinctively looked away. The cruel punishment had long since dispelled his drowsiness. It had been a long time since he had witnessed the old woman's true nature.

“But, Lady Jikita...” A sudden, calm voice rang out.
“I don't think Justice would find out about that matter.” It was Garcia's voice.
The holy knight's face showed none of his usual smirk. On the contrary, a sharp and intelligent face, like that of a different person, continued speaking.
"Those who saw it... say that he is skilled despite his youth. But in the end, that's all it is. There's no need to worry about it."
But Jikita gave a small laugh at the Holy Knight standing with his back straight. “Me too... If it were anyone else, I wouldn't be this angry. But... That Justice kid is no good. He's the worst.”
At those words, Raemos sat up. Febres and Garcia also exchanged confused glances.
“The worst... What do you mean?”
“Who exactly is he?”
The old woman settled back into her seat. Calming her rapid breathing, Zikita tilted her head and confessed. “I don't know, that's why he's scary...”
“What do you mean...?”
“No one knows who he really is.” Extending her withered fingers to the side, Jikita sipped her Zeron tea again. Even so, Garcia couldn't make sense of the conversation.
“You say no one...?”
“About two years ago, I suppose...” Slowly, Jikita began to speak. "Rumors started... about a Holy War Officer bearing the mark of a heretical sect. Among a very few Holy War Officers, mind you."
“That's absurd...”
“Now, listen. They say one Holy War Officer vanished. Since then, I heard his son,who is also a Holy War Officer, started showing the Heretical Crest on his hands...”
Jikita closed her eyes, pulling the memory closer. Like a storyteller, the old woman slowly began to weave her words.
“Most claimed the father had fallen to the Blood Oath... that the son was sacrificed as the Blood Oath's price... But since he could wield miracles, some insisted he was still a Holy Warrior...”
“Where exactly did that discussion take place...”
Fixing her gaze on Garcia, the old woman opened her mouth with difficulty. “...The Twelve Popes Committee.”
The Holy Knight froze at the name, as did Febres and Raemos. The Twelve Popes Committee, composed of the highest-ranking Holy War Officials and Holy Knights, was the supreme leadership of the New Continent Crusade. It would not be an exaggeration to say they were the people closest to the Creator God.
“Even among the Twelve Popes, there seems to have been disagreement over how to deal with him. It's just a rumor, but... it's too big to be just a rumor.”
“......” Garcia and the others fell silent.
The Twelve Popes were, so to speak, saviors. They were the supreme beings who had received the most divine blessings. Even they were troubled by this being... They couldn't believe it was Justice, nor did they want to.
“So, where did this cursed child go after that?”

Jikita pinched her forehead at the Holy Knight's question. “In the end, I heard that the Holy War Officer was sent on a pilgrimage while his punishment was pending. They say he'll wander the frontier until he dies, without being given any honors...”
“Is that the answer of the Twelve Popes...”
“I suppose so. There was no other way.”
Febres gasped audibly. “So... that's the one they added to their forces, Justice...?”
“We don't know yet. The Twelve Popes haven't denied or confirmed the rumor. They haven't disclosed any information...”
Jikita let out a resigned laugh. But naturally, everyone fell silent.
A Holy War Officer who might be a Blood Oath Member was being left unchecked... It was an incident that the Twelve Popes Committee, which ruled the New Continent Crusade, would never approve of. The old woman fiddled with her life support tube and spoke in a tone of despair.
"But... Warden asked me something strange. He asked if I knew any Holy War Officers bearing the Heretical Crest... That's when it clicked."
Garcia's eyebrows shot up. “So... Warden has noticed?”
“Thatfool! Why hasn't he reported it?!”
As Febres erupted, the old woman forced a dry laugh. “Yes, he's definitely noticed... but he can't do anything about it.” The old woman wore a sneer, stroking her chin repeatedly.
“That stiff-necked coward's head is filled only with strategy. So he's just pretending it never happened... because that's the easiest way out.”
“Is that the kind of man he is...?”
“That kind of man. That's why I never made him a comrade. He's always worrying, giving himself stomachaches... relying on medicine... that's the kind of man he is.”
“I see,” Jikita said, turning to ask the Holy Knight.
Garcia shrugged his shoulders. Even to the Holy Knight, Warden was ultimately just a man who could be dismissed with a simple gesture.
“Pretending not to see...” Febres smiled for just a moment, then quickly regained his tense expression. “But we can't ignore the matter of Justice. If he's a Blood Oath member, then we're the ones in danger.” The Council Chairman cleared his throat loudly. “Lady Jikita, is there any way you can find out his true identity?”
“It's dangerous... but I'll take care of it.” Jikita gave a gentle smile, as if to calm those around her. “I'll have the people I left behind in Vaslan investigate Justice's identity and the rumors about him. We should get a report soon.”
“I hope it's soon.”
“I know. But anyway...” Reining in the impatient Febres, Jikita pointed at the holy knight. “Right now, we need to deal with Warun Village. Garcia. There's definitely... an evil spirit there. Take care of it quickly.”
“Understood. Tomorrow, without fail...”
“Only we of the Holy Church and the Council are being targeted. I don't know what their goal is... but first, we must deal with the enemy before us...”
Jikita nodded at those words and turned to look at Raemos.
“Don't take your eyes off Justice. You can do that much, right?”
“Yes, leave it to me...”

Wiping the blood from his mouth, Raemos bowed his head in deep respect. His body still trembled with fear.
But with a satisfied smile, Jikita crossed herself. “Now then, everyone, do what must be done... We have only one goal: to drive the evil spirits who oppose our divine army from this land...”
In unison, the group crossed themselves.
It was a scene of wicked prayer inside the cramped covered wagon.

Night fell surprisingly early.
At this time of year, the days in the Nevoa Wetlands were extremely short. Even without that, thick rain clouds always covered the sky, and there was very little sunlight. Bonfires lit up the campsite, and before they knew it, it was time for dinner.
“Thank you for your hard work yesterday, Mister Justice.”
The holy knights passing by all greeted him in unison.
“How are you feeling?”
“Please eat plenty, don't hold back.”
“Ah, thank you...” He nodded hurriedly at their kind words. Justice busily returned their greetings while bringing stewed vegetables to his mouth.
Next to him, Alena and Cesia smiled. It was an unusually peaceful dinner time.
“Yesterday, Mr. Justice, you were asleep the whole time...” Cesia offered him a slice of cheese and peered into the boy's face. “Everyone couldn't say hello... But everyone was worried about you.”
“Yeah... Sorry for having worried you all.” He took the cheese and immediately popped it into his mouth. Seeing his profile, Alena's face also broke into a smile.
“And everyone respects you now, too.” Sitting on the ground, Alena placed the soup bowl back on the wooden box table. “They say you're young, yet you can perform difficult miracles... You summoned quickly... And above all, they say you're courageous and reliable.” Alena said, winking. “Well, I share the sentiment.”
“But Riot always gets mad at me.” The boy looked down, a little embarrassed. “She tells me to be more calm... to look around and think before I fight... If I could do that, I could be stronger.” Justice swallowed his cheese and slurped his soup. He sighed and looked around at the scene of their evening meal.
The expedition team was larger than last night.
They had lost four members, but the number of reinforcements exceeded that. Perhaps because of that, there was no sign of the heavy atmosphere that comes with losing comrades. On the contrary, with the assault on Warun Village tomorrow, the holy knights were in high spirits.
“Everyone... is in high spirits.”
“Well, that's because of you.” The female knight smiled as she looked at Justice, who spoke as if it were someone else's business.
“Because you defeated the evil spirits... everyone believes we can win. The strongest holy warrior is the most reliable. So, it's because of you.”
“Is that so..?” Justice smiled and tilted her head.
“The church leader came from Vaslan, so I'm sure everyone feels reassured.”
“That's true, but...” Cesia took a sip of her post-meal Zerone tea and stroked her flaxen hair. “Justice is trusted by everyone... And we are too...”

The boy gazed at Cesia, then shifted his gaze to the bonfire next to them. There, too, were the Holy Knights enjoying their evening meal. Justice returned his usual smile. It was an embarrassing proof of affection.
They were there. Noticing his gaze, they smiled and held up their plates.
(But...) The boy was afraid of this feeling of happiness. If they found out about his hands, they would suddenly change and condemn and blame him. And then, surely, he would be chased away as usual. Justice was grateful for the present moment, when that was allowed, and savored it.
“Well, with Cesia, it's more like love than trust, right?” Alena grinned and deliberately nudged her best friend's shoulder with her elbow. “Even yesterday, you were nursing Justice with a face like you were about to cry!”
“I-I didn't look like that!” Only to her best friend did Sesia resist with strong words. But Alena's accusations didn't stop.
"Is that so? Weren't you the one who said to me, 'What will happen if Mr. Justice dies?
“I didn't say that!”
“Yes, you did! You were crying while washing Justice's clothes!”
“Ugh, you idiot, Alena!”
But Justice smiled happily at Cesia as she raised her fist. “I really... worried you, didn't I? I'm sorry, Cesia...”
“N-no...” Cesia clutched the hem of her skirt and stammered. Seeing this out of the corner of her eye, Alena let out a big sigh.
“But yesterday... Riot was the one who took care of you at first, right? She seems rough around the edges, but she's surprisingly kind.”
"Yeah... Riot is kind." Hiding his true feelings, the boy nodded. “Riot's helped me out countless times. She's the best partner ever.”
“Then you should've let Cesia nurse you!” Alena patted her partner's shoulder.
“If you had, this pure love could've grown even deeper! Honestly... what a clueless girl!” In that instant, a fist slammed into the top of Alena's head.
“W-Who was that?! That hurts!”
“I look clumsy and I'm clueless anyway!” Emerging from the darkness, Riot roared. The warrior demon looked down at Alena with undisguised disgust.
“Oh, Riot! Thank you for your hard work guarding us! Would you like some dinner?”
“Don't you dare use that sweet voice on me...!”
Riot's arm closed in on Arena's neck.
The female knight let out a coquettish cry and fled.
Justice and Cesia laughed themselves silly at the two fighting each other.
That was the last happy moment for the four of them.

He reached for the lamp by his pillow... Riot stopped turning off the light.
“What's wrong? Aren't you going to sleep yet?”
Justice was already covered with a blanket on the wagon bed. Next to him, Riot let out a tired voice. “Can... I ask you something?”
“What...?”
“What... do you think of Cesia?”
The boy blinked at the sudden question. “Wh-what? That’s so out of the blue...”
“It's not about liking or disliking her. It's... what kind of girl do you think she is?”

Choosing her words carefully, even forcing a smile, Riot asked. Justice thought about it seriously.
"Well... she's kind... She's thoughtful, as you'd expect from a secretary... But she's quiet and reserved... She seems fragile, too."
It was the answer she expected. Riott would have liked to say the same thing. But...
“Yeah, I guess so... But what if she... what if she's a Blood Oath?”
“Wh-what are you saying, Riot...?”
“It's just a hypothetical, okay?” Riot continued the topic as if joking. “You know how they say it. Evil gods prey on human carelessness. And who’s the most careless one here... Cesia. I just thought it'd suck if she was.”
“Don't even think that!” The boy snapped sharply at Riot's evasive answer. “Don't even think that... not even as a joke! Cesia being a Blood Oath member... imagining something like that is disrespectful to Cesia!”
“Ah, ah... I'm sorry...” Riot regretted starting the conversation with such a cowardly phrase.
Justice himself had been suspected of being a Blood Oath member countless times. He knew better than anyone the pain of being suspected. That was precisely why his anger was so intense.
“I'm sorry for imagining such strange things. I'm truly sorry...”
“If it weren't you, Riot, I'd be even angrier...” The boy said, hugging his knees under the blanket. “I hate being suspected by others... That's why I hate suspecting others too...”
“I know, I should have understood that.”
“No, it's okay now.” Justice said, looking at the staff beside him. "Besides... there's absolutely no way that could happen. If Sesia were a Blood Oath, everyone's Holy War Staffs would glow."
Riot swallowed her next question.
(Then what if there were a Blood Oath who didn't react to the Holy War Staffs...?)
But she couldn't ask it. It was too harsh. That very question was the interrogation Justice had been subjected to countless times before.
“How the hell would someone fool a Holy War Staff?”
She remembered being asked that face to face. Even Justice's face at that moment came back to him. It was an expression he never wanted to see again.
(I can't tell him... About Sesia...) Riot turned off the lamp and pulled the blanket over his head.
“Sorry, I'm going to sleep now.” The warrior demon said in a girl's voice. “Tomorrow we're storming Waroon Village. Get plenty of sleep and rest your body...”
“Yeah... Good night, Riot.” But he wouldn't be able to sleep.
Riot was certain of it, and she bit her lip under the blanket.

“Asleep...”
Muttering outside the carriage, the black shadow began its sprint. Dodging the night watch knights' gaze, the shadow darted between the covered wagons. Then, it slid silently into one.
“Garcia, come in...” Jikita, seated in the cargo bed, beckoned the shadow. Garcia, cloaked in black, moved silently forward and knelt before the old woman.

“My apologies for this late hour...”
“Oh, it's nothing. I asked you to come. So, how's that child...?” The church leader shielded her hand from the lamp, savoring its faint warmth. “Did you catch anything?”
"Nothing in particular. Just trivial matters."
To the Holy Knight, unaware of Riot's feelings on the matter, it sounded like nothing more than idle chatter. Jiki nodded and sipped her late-night Zeron tea.
“I suppose so... But there is some progress.”
“What do you mean...?”
“The investigation records Vaslan just sent over. Regarding Justice, of course.” Jikita thrust a loosely bound stack of papers toward the Holy Knight. Garcia carefully leafed through the considerable amount sent via a transport miracle.
“The Wolf King of Bergen... So he’s Eisen's son... And Justice?”
“If that's the case, he might be a rare talent.” Jikita scratched her white hair and tapped it lightly. “I've met Eisen many times. For someone who shut himself away in his study, poring over old books... he was a good field commander, well suited to actual combat...”
“I heard he fought on equal terms with the Evil Spirit King Laviel during the Northern Turmoil... In that case, his family background is impeccable...”
Garcia's words made the old woman choke on a chuckle.
“What's impeccable is Justice's battle record... Just look at his official combat records. Here, starting from here...”
The printed form was filled with dense text. Dates, locations, types and numbers of evil gods defeated...
Garcia couldn't help but groan. “This is the battle record of a thirteen-year-old kid... It's the equivalent of three years' worth of work for the Vaslan Holy Knights...”
“Then...”
“Isn't something strange about this?” Jikita asked quietly. “He's got the pedigree, the talent... the very picture of an elite brat. A kid like that being sent on a pilgrimage that cuts off his path to glory... Something's up.”
“That's why the heretical mark...”
“No, I brought it up, but... I'm thinking it might be a clever lie.” Jikita voiced words that contradicted her own suspicion. “No matter how you look at it... this boy shouldn't be on a pilgrimage. He's destined to become one of the Twelve Popes. If that's true, then either the rumors are right and he was exiled, or...”
“...”
Garcia swallowed hard.
The old woman leaned closer and whispered softly. “...appointed as an undercover inspector..."
The holy knight's heartbeat quickened. He had heard rumors of such a role existing. Someone sent by the Twelve Popes to infiltrate various regions and expose crimes within the Holy Church...
“Well, that's just a rumor too...” Jikita placed a hand on the holy knight's shoulder, easing his tension. “Either way, be careful. I'll meet that child tomorrow too. I want to meet him... talk to him, at least.”
“I pray that's not the case...”

“Exactly. Whether it's an inspector or a Blood Oath member, either case is bad news.” The old woman narrowed her eyes, concluding the conversation.
The day that was about to dawn promised to be an unusually long one...

“Extermination Squad One, embark!”
“Extermination Squad Two, embark!”
The Nevoa Wetlands in the early morning were shrouded in thick, milky fog. Agile voices echoed through the morning mist. The expedition team had already begun paddling their canoes toward Warun Village.
“What? We're leaving already?” Rubbing her arms against the unexpected morning chill, Riott hurried to the waterway's edge. Over fifty holy knights had already boarded the small boats. Garcia was in command.
“Whoa, did you come all this way just to see me off?” The holy knight rubbed his stubble and grinned. “You couldn't bear to say goodbye, so you jumped out of bed, huh? I get it, women are all the same...”
“Don't be stupid! More importantly...” Riot looked back. Justice had finally caught up. Once they were together, the battle armor demon's eyes turned serious again.
“Which ship are we going on?”
“That's right!” Justice asked breathlessly. “We're going to Waroon Village too... No, please let us go! We want to learn from you all!” He pointed behind them.
“You two are staying behind! Ask Alena for details!”
Hearing this, the two looked behind them. “We want to go too!”
But Garcia shook his head. The canoe quietly glided out onto the waterway.
Alena, when asked, had a complicated expression on her face. “I'm sorry, that's how it is...”
“What do you mean, ‘that's how it is’...”
“Today... we have to let Captain Garcia take the credit...” Alena pursed her lips in dissatisfaction at the puzzled Riot.
“Today... is the grand stage for defeating the evil spirit, right? That will directly... be credited to someone else.”
“What? Do you think we're going to steal that?” Riot scratched her red hair. “I don't want to look like a cheap woman either... I wouldn't do something like that.”
But Justice seemed satisfied, and slumped his small shoulders. “I see... It's true that the credit for defeating the evil spirit will affect our future promotions within the Association... If we defeat it, it might look like we're stealing the credit...”
“Sorry about that,” Alena said, patting Riot's shoulder and sticking out her tongue. “I got left out too. They said the advance party's achievements were enough...”
“You've been through a lot too.”
“Not really... Not as much as Lord Warden.” With that, Alena pointed ahead. “He seems especially... nervous today.”
At her words, Riot shifted his gaze.
Justice noticed too, and gasped involuntarily. “L-Lord Warden...”
He was standing there.
The boy let out a gasp of surprise.

Pushing through the crowd of Holy Knights, several Holy War Officers made their way to the canoe. At the head of them was Warden, but what of his profile?

His cheeks were sunken, his complexion dark as mud. It wasn't just a sickly face. It was the face of death.

“I leave it to you...” He commanded those around him in a hoarse voice.

“Send word to Lady Zikita. Don't worry. May the gods protect you.” The remaining holy knights chanted words of prayer for his safety.

“Warden!” Justice called out one last time to the holy war officer who had boarded the canoe. Warden stared at the boy in surprise. For a moment, neither spoke.

Riot also looked at his tired face. Looking at his two collaborators, Warden gave him a slight smile.

“I'm going... When I return... Let's talk again.”

Riot felt uneasy. She couldn't even thank him for keeping Justice's secret. Warden had been too busy with the operation for her to approach him for the past two days.

The same was true for Justice. The boy made the sign of the cross and said a prayer.

“May God bless you...”

In silence, the canoe carrying Warden disappeared into the thick fog. On the shore, there was still a murmur of concern for their journey.

“He's gone...” Justice stared into the thick fog for a long time. “I... wanted to talk more...”

“Don't be silly, you can talk when he comes back.” Riot stroked his lustrous blond hair and smiled encouragingly. “Besides, it's not like it's been decided that today will be the end of it. Let's just take it easy, okay?”

Justice nodded and smiled. Then, a petite figure in blue clothing slowly approached the two.

“Are you two busy...?” Councilor Raemos bowed with a cheerful expression. His hand pointed smoothly toward a covered wagon. “Our leader here in Vaslan, Lord Febres, has expressed a strong desire to meet you. Would you be so kind as to come?”

“Huh, us...?” Riot's face twisted in surprise.

But as if sensing this, Raemos turned to the boy. “And the Archbishop is also present.” The councilor continued, his smile unchanged. “I believe it would be discourteous to refuse...”

Riot's spine tingled at that plastered-on smile. It was an ominous sign, one she only felt on the battlefield.

A canopy stretched between the two covered wagons, greatly expanding the command post. The voices of the holy knights mingled incessantly. Even a wireless communication device, surely a precious item, had been set up in the field headquarters—perhaps brought by the reinforcements.

“Still no word... Raemos...” Waking from a doze, Febres let out a huge yawn. “I'd think they'd be here by now...?”

“Indeed, it should be about time.” Raemos, holding a pocket watch, bowed his head to the Council Chairman. “I will inform you immediately upon receiving word. Until then, please rest.”

“I see,” said Febres, rolling over. The old man sprawled on the bench and began snoring again.

Beside him lay several empty wine bottles. Pinch his nose at the smell of alcohol on the old man's breath, Riot clicked her tongue. “What's with that old geezer... He doesn't seem motivated at all.”
“Yeah... maybe...” Justice replied, looking troubled. But after saying that, he let out a deep sigh. The boy was also fed up with the current situation. The two of them had been sitting in the corner of the command center for hours. All they could do was watch as reports came in from the expeditionary force.
He had been summoned, but he hadn't been able to meet with the church leader. As for the Council Chairman, Febres, he was just lying down in front of him.
(What the hell is this treatment?) Riot tried to leave the command center several times. But each time, the guarding holy knights stopped her. Everyone just told her to wait a little longer.
(Something... is definitely up...) Riot had also noticed Raemos' gaze since earlier. He was moving around inside the command center, but upon closer observation, he wasn't doing anything particularly important. He'd glance over here occasionally, then move again.
It was amateur surveillance. Raemos seemed unaware of the iron rule that those being watched must not be made aware of the surveillance. Riot inwardly sneered at his ignorance and decided to wait and see for a while.
(Do as you please... Though I don't like it...) It was during the endless boredom that Riot stretched for the thirty-sixth time.
“The Church Leader, Jikita, is here.” Justice and Riott rose from their chairs upon hearing the holy knight's announcement. An old woman in white holy robes slowly descended the ladder from inside the covered wagon. After receiving the holy staff from her servant, the very old woman gave the two a gentle smile.
They bowed respectfully. “You've worked hard... both of you... I am Jikita, head of the Vaslan Church. To participate in this campaign as pilgrims you must be truly virtuous children.”
“No, not at all...” Justice took the old woman's hand and seated her in a nearby chair. “I apologize for my late greeting. I am Justice, Holy War Officer.”
“I am Riot, the Armored Demon...”
Jikita bowed her head and sat down deeply in the chair. Behind her, Raemos had quietly come to sit beside her. Both of them knelt before the church leader.
“I've heard about your exploits with the advance party...”
“Thank you.”
“I hear you're quite skilled despite your youth?”
“No... I'm still training...”
“Oh, is that so... Where is your hometown?”
“Bergen, a city-state in the Saxony region.” Justice answered obediently, her smile never fading. Jikita's questions were also quite ordinary.
But Riot kept her gaze fixed on the small old woman. She wasn't seeing anything in particular. She was simply trying not to miss a single movement or word she uttered. There was a reason she had been kept waiting.
The same went for being watched. Since Raemos himself, a member of the Council, was the one keeping watch, the order must have come from either Febres or this old woman. And Febres was... a rather pitiful old man.

"By the way... who is your master?"
Ignoring Riot's gaze, Jikita pressed on with her questions.
"I hear you summoned Life Transfer Healing instantly... To reach that level of skill at your age... You must have had a truly exceptional teacher, eh?" Jikita's eyes narrowed suddenly.
Riot and Raemos tensed at this piercing question. Yet the boy's smile remained unchanged.
"My father taught me... He was a Holy War Officer too..."
"May I ask his name...?"
"The Wolf King of Bergen, Eisen." The boy uttered the name casually. "He was... my proud father. I haven't seen him in a long time..."
"I see," Jikita smiled. But behind him, Raemos was visibly terrified. The blood drained from his face, and his lips turned purple.
Riot finally understood.
(These guys have noticed... They must know about Justice... That's why... they're watching us...) But even though they had noticed, they did nothing.
Taking a cup of Zeron tea from her attendant, the old woman calmly sipped it.
"I'd like to hear a little more detail... about you, and about your father..." There was a hint of menace in Jikita's voice. Riot instinctively braced herself. But the old woman remained calm, ignoring the killing intent emanating from the warrior demon.
"Who exactly are you...?"
"Message from the extermination squad!"
Riot's hand reached for the pistol at her waist... At that very moment, the communications officer shouted sharply into the radio.
"They've just arrived at the site of the former village of Warun! So far, there's been no resistance!"
Jikita stepped back, looking bored.
Riot relaxed her outstretched arm.
The command center suddenly became noisy, and the old woman slowly stood up.
"Let's go. I'm worried about Warden..." Silently, Riot and Justice followed her. The Armored Demon glanced at Raemos as he left. But without a word, the councilor went to Febres. "Master Febres, a message from the expeditionary force..."
"...It's getting noisy..."
The surrounding area was noisy with the commotion of the Holy Knights and Holy War Officers. Febres slid down from his bench and began walking toward his covered carriage.
"Wake me when you have the results. Until then... faah... no need to call me..." Scratching the back of his neck, the Council Chairman left the command post.

He was an old man who had never cared about slaying evil spirits. No, perhaps he didn't even care about politics. What mattered to Febres was the position of Council Chairman. That title attracted many tributes. Gold, privileges, women......
He had bought the chairmanship itself with money to obtain them. Thanks to that, he enjoyed a life of luxury, but this swamp offered nothing. In a land where neither gold nor women could be had, the only pleasure left was drinking himself to sleep.
"Ah, my apologies..."

"...Don't make a fuss..."
Threatening with his knife, Febres leaned over Cesia's small body.

Pulling back the curtain of the covered wagon, he found a small girl inside. Sesia was making up Febres's bed on the cargo platform.
“Ah, you must be Warden’s secretary...” Burping ungracefully, Febres climbed into the cargo hold. “You came to fix my bed... That's kind of you...”
“Yes... I just finished.”
“Perfect timing. Go pour me a drink.” Fetching his personal distilled liquor from the corner of the bed, Febres edged closer to the girl.
“I'll drink... You drink too...”
“But...” Before the startled Sesia, the old man pressed his lips to the bottle. He swallowed it all in one gulp, not caring that some spilled down his throat.
“...Now, you drink too...” Febres forcefully thrust the bottle mouth he'd just sucked on toward her. Cesia dodged and tried to leap off the cart. But the old man roughly yanked her slender arm back.
“Master F-Febres!”
“Can't you obey the Chairman's orders?!” With that, he tore at the collar of her dress with brute force. He flung the bottle aside and tore at her clothes with both hands. A scream nearly escaped Cesia's throat.
“Help...!”
“...Be quiet...!” Crumpling her small body beneath him, Febres covered her mouth with his right hand. In his left, a dagger flashed, drawn from his waist.
“Make a sound and I'll stab you... You don't want to die... So be quiet for a while...”
His filthy lips drew near the girl's neck.
Cesia closed her eyes, resisting.
The extermination squad had arrived, but no one came to her aid. Hearing news of the squad's assault, the guarding soldiers had vanished somewhere.
Febres stared intently at Sesia's chest. Her sun-untouched white skin was the ultimate luxury for an old man. Uncontrollably, drool dripped from his trembling lips.
Febres trembled with ecstasy. “...Ah... Ahh...”
In that instant, Febres couldn't comprehend what had happened. Along with the drool, blood flowed from his own mouth. Dark, murky blood dripped down onto Sesia's chest.
“...Ah... Aaaahh...!” Febres covered his mouth with his right hand. Cesia shoved the old man aside and stepped back. Only then did the old man fully comprehend everything. A dagger was thrust into Febres' solar plexus, buried up to the hilt. A torrent of blood was already flowing from the wound onto the floor.
It was undoubtedly Sesia's dagger.

【Chapter 4: Warun Village / Resentment】

Emerging from the thicket, Warden halted his steps. Garcia and the nearly fifty knights crouched low, scanning their surroundings - they had reached a corner of the forest where all sound ceased. Vines grew thickly, tree branches stretched wildly. Not only the ground, but even the rain clouds were obscured.
“This is Warun Village...” Wiping sweat from his brow, Garcia stated with certainty. “No doubt about it. The scorched remains... are still here.”

Warden reluctantly acknowledged the words. Indeed, traces of houses still lingered among the trees. Signs resembling road markers were stuck in the mud.

In just two years, the former village had been swallowed by the forest. They had returned to the village where two hundred people had been burned alive.

“Communications Officer, contact headquarters...” Warden, his face ashen, beckoned one man over. “We've already advanced to the ruins of Warun Village. We'll report the situation every three minutes thereafter. Open the line and stand by... That's all.”

“Yes, sir. Immediately...” Facing the portable communicator, one Holy Knight began calling the command post.

Meanwhile, Warden was drenched in cold sweat. His stomach churned painfully, his body aching from the medication. But now was not the time to take more... “We advance, Garcia...”

The Holy War Officer commanded in a resolute voice.

“Stay alert. The False God... must be here.”

Birds overhead greeted the visitor returning after two years with a deafening clamor.

“Lord Warden!” The Holy Knights leading the way cried out in unison. They had stepped into a particularly large ruin. A tense atmosphere emanated from deep within the walls, thickly entwined with vines.

“What is it?!” Warden gripped his holy war staff and stepped into the ruins. He fell silent instantly.

“This... place...”

The ruins had once been vast, perhaps twenty meters square. The spacious interior resembled a warehouse. Yet workbenches lay scattered everywhere. It was a ruin reminiscent of a factory. Vines had burst through the window frames and reached the floor. Yet, only the central portion of that floor was clearly exposed, the ground laid bare. Engraved upon that ground were heretical symbols.

“What the hell...” Garcia groaned behind him. Just as the Holy Cultists used sacred symbols, the Blood Oathers employed forbidden runes to perform various rituals.

Before them, a star-shaped array inscribed with those forbidden runes was drawn on the ground. A gate to summon a demon spirit, so humans could borrow its magical power... a so-called Blood Oath Array.

“Someone was here...” Warden muttered, his gaze fixed on the ground. “No, they might still be lurking somewhere... Deep within this swamp, abandoned for two long years... The Demon God was summoned...”

The Holy War Officer crouched low, touching his fingertip to the center of the Blood Oath Circle. The damp earth was blackened. Crushing it with his hand, black liquid dripped onto his wrist.

“Blood... Not old...” Warden clicked his tongue, his disgust plain. “The stolen brain matter was sacrificed here... That seems the most reasonable conclusion.”

“Communications Officer, contact headquarters.” Garcia turned and gave the order. “The extermination squad has discovered the Blood Pact Array. Transmitting footage immediately.”

But that voice was drowned out by someone's scream.

“Th-the Blood Pact Array...!”

Without needing to be told, Warden leapt backward. The star-shaped magic array suddenly began flickering with red light. Before anyone could react, the light intensified dramatically.
“Retreat! It's dangerous!” The Metalite at the staff of the Holy War Officer also flashed a warning signal. In the crimson-tinged deep forest, Warden strained his voice to its limit. “The Evil Spirit is near! Prepare for battle! Prepare for battle!”
Holy Knights lined up in front, Holy War Officers prepared to summon miracles. Meanwhile, the Communications Officer desperately tried to hail the command post.
“This is Warden’s Squad! Command Post, respond! Command Post, respond!”
But no matter how many times they called, there was no answer. A sense of urgency spread through the group. Garcia swung his sword, and Warden raised his Holy War Staff. And it passed through the gate to the demon realm, beginning to materialize calmly above the Blood Oath Formation.
“Command Post, respond! Command Post, respond! This is the Warden Squad, respond!”
The communicator called out repeatedly.
But there was no response.
Everyone in the command post forgot their duties and stared blankly into the distance.
The Holy Knights, the Holy War Officers...
Jikita, Raemos... Riot... Justice too... They all stared at a covered wagon, frozen in terror.
"Gah... Gahhh!!!”
“Lord Febres!”
“Your Excellency, the Chairman!”
The holy knights shouted and rushed over. But the blood gushing from the back of his throat would not stop.
Even as he tried to hold it back with his hand, bloody foam bubbled over from Febres' fingers.
“...G...G...G...!”
His angry voice could not form words.
Even so, pointing a finger toward the covered wagon, Febres collapsed face-first into the mud.
“Medical officer! Where are you?!”
“Tend to him! Quickly! His breathing...!”
The holy knights frantically surrounded the blood-soaked leader. Raemos also rushed over, personally lifting him up by the shoulders.
“Lord Febres, keep your wits about you!”
But there was no life left in the old man's eyes. The dagger slipped from his left hand. Raemos's hands began to tremble as the body grew cold.
“He's... dead...”
Jikita stood up from her chair and listened to the voice with a grim expression. “What the hell is going on?”
Riot also just stood by and watched the sudden turn of events.
But Justice was different. As if he had noticed something, the boy ran straight towards the covered wagon. He slipped between the holy knights and quickly jumped into the cargo area.

“Cesia...!” The girl crouched down, holding her torn chest. She trembled silently and looked up at Justice's voice.
"Jus... Tice..." She finally murmured in a voice that seemed about to vanish.
The boy held Cesia, who had thrown herself into his arms, with a look of surprise on his face. “Sesia, did you... did you stab him...?”
Riot was startled by those words. The warrior demon who had followed them into the cargo bed also glanced around the scene. The ransacked berth... rolling liquor bottles... clear signs of a struggle...
Seeing Sesia's pitiful state, Riot clenched her fists.
“That damn old man...!”
“You did this to Lord Febres...!” Raemos and the Holy Knights finally peered inside the covered wagon. Immediately, angry voices rose.
“Cesia, was it you?!”
“No, it wasn't!” The boy resolutely countered the shouts. Justice, still holding Cesia, flashed his eyes at the Holy Knights. “It wasn't Cesia's fault! Cesia was only defending herself!” His voice was sharp and cutting. It was the mark of a justified action. “Look closely at this dagger...”
The holy knights recovered from their shock and inspected the covered wagon. It was obvious to anyone who saw it. Riot pointed at the body with her toe.
Riot jumped down from the wagon and approached the body of the Council Chairman.
“This... this is his dagger, isn't it... He threatened Cesia with this...”
The holy knights made no protest at this action. Their gaze upon their council chairman gradually shifted to contempt. But the leader of their city-state had died before their eyes. The shock silenced them all for a moment.
“At least give him something to wear...” Jikita finally stepped forward and gave the order, as if in resignation. “And hurry up and take care of the body... Prepare to send it to Vaslan.” Whether she had resigned herself to the situation or not, Jikita had already regained her composure. At her words, the Holy Knights began to take action.
“Justice... Justice...” The boy continued to stroke the hair of the sobbing Cesia. “Don't worry, it's not your fault... It's not your fault...”
“Justice, I...”
“It's okay, it's okay...” Justice continued to speak to her. Even so, Sesia's tears did not stop. On the contrary, her trembling only grew stronger. Looking down at the agonized remains, Riot pushed her bangs back with a weary expression.
“Hey, Raemos...” The War Armor Demon asked the Councilor beside the increasingly noisy corpse.
“What will happen to Sesia after this?”
“A trial, of course... It was His Excellency the Council Chairman who was killed...” Raemos shook his still-confused head. “Even if it was self-defense, it's still murder...”
“Let's just call it self-defense.” Riot declared emphatically. “Even if she killed the Council Chairman, I won't allow her punishment to be made harsher.”
Even if it was a trial, it was ultimately only at the city-state level. Depending on backroom deals and circumstances, verdicts were often overturned at will.

With the Council Chairman dead, it was entirely possible those around him would seek revenge through the trial.
“No, that won't happen...” Raemos shifted his gaze to the corpse. “In any case, we need a thorough examination...”
“Right, we should properly inspect the body...” Riot glanced at the old man once more.
Sesia's dagger was lodged in the old man's solar plexus. And now... a chill ran down her spine.
(That dagger from that night... The dagger of light I saw that night...)
Why hadn't she noticed it until now? Just as she was about to curse herself, something strange happened.
The dagger suddenly emitted a blinding light, causing a band of pale blue light to dance around it.
“What's going on!”
“No, get away!”
The holy knights shouted angrily.
Then, the dagger began to tremble on its own and slipped out of Febres’ corpse. It flew up into the air and instantly doubled in brightness.
“Ah... that's...” Justice was stunned by the dagger dancing in the sky. Then, the blade rapidly changed direction and flew across the air toward Cesia.
“Justice, dodge!” Riot quickly drew her gun. But before she could intercept it, the dagger stabbed into the ground at Cesia's feet. In an instant, the light changed color. The dagger flickered with a poisonous red light, as if breathing.
“What the hell is this...” Justice groaned, and Cesia's expression stiffened. The boy stared at the girl and shuddered.
“You...” Even Zikita's complexion paled.
The old woman and the boy... And the holy war staffs held by the surrounding holy war officers lit up in warning colors all at once. It was proof that the dagger was imbued with magic.
“Cesia, you can't be...”
“Capture that girl, Justice!” Jikita barked out a shrill order, drowning out the boy's words. “Cesia is a Blood Oath! Arrest her!”
It was an order that brooked no argument. The Holy Knights moved as one. But the boy was different.
“W-wait!” Justice shouted, restraining the holy knights. “There must be some reason for this! Please wait just a moment!”
But more than twenty holy knights had already pounced. In an instant, they grabbed her by the collar.
“Cesia, you...”
“You... you didn't deliberately...”
With angry shouts, they pulled her forcefully toward them. This time, her clothes were torn all the way to her back.
“Stop this violence! Cesia!”
“Justice, calm down...!” The voices of the boy and the armored warrior crossed.
But Cesia was surrounded by the Holy Knights and pulled down into the mud.
Raemos continued to shout desperately. “That girl is a Blood Oath! We must not let her escape!”

Cesia tried to escape from the Holy Knights, covering her chest with her torn clothes. But her legs wouldn't obey her. She stumbled and fell.

“Cesia! Run! Cesia!” Justice shouted, for some reason.

One of the Holy Knights swung his fist down at Sesia. The metal gauntlet struck her flaxen hair. Her skin split open, blood spurting out. Even so, the Holy Knights did not relent.

“Don't let her escape! Kill her!”

“She is the enemy of Lord Febres! Kill her, kill her!”

Cesia clutched her dagger and closed her eyes as if she had come to terms with her fate. But...

“Wait, please!” Justice shouted once more and embraced the girl. He boldly restrained the holy knights and stood in their way, putting his own body in the way.

“Cesia isn't that kind of girl! There must be some reason! Please listen to her!”

The holy knights were stunned. They were obligated to fight without hesitation when facing enemies, especially evil spirits and blood allies. This was especially true for Holy War Officers.

“Step aside, Justice!” The Holy Knights shouted in unison.

But Justice's eyes were fixed firmly on protecting Cesia. Without thinking, everyone became unsettled.

“We have been deceived!”

“Why are you siding with Cesia?!”

“It's dangerous! Come here quickly!”

Watching from behind, Raemos stiffened, wondering if the boy had lost his mind. And then...

(Justice...) Riot also stared intently at his partner. No matter how she thought about it, the Holy Knights' words were correct. Even so, Justice refused to back down.

Wondering what was driving the boy... Riot shifted her gaze to Cesia.

The girl stood stiffly behind Justice, looking apologetic. Her clothes were torn and tattered. But there was not a trace of malice in her moist eyes.

They wanted to slash those eyes. Something about it bothered her.

“Please...” Justice stood in front of the Holy Knights, as if to protect Cesia. “It's natural to kill a Blood Oath member, but she's just a little girl, isn't she? And she's using a weapon imbued with magic... Don't you think there might be some other reason for that?”

The Holy Knights were speechless. The boy looked each of them straight in the eye and asked again. “It's not too late to hear her reason. Can you give us just a little time?”

But the holy knights looked fearfully behind them. There, a white-haired old woman was approaching.

“But that doesn't mean we need to sit down for tea and listen to her story...” For the first time in front of the boy, Jikita squeezed out a voice filled with murderous intent. Riot braced herself, and Justice pressed his lips together.

“I'll take her to Vaslan and make her talk. It'll hurt a little, though.”

“Wh... What...!” Justice realized the old woman's true nature for the first time. With a smile and narrowed eyes, Jikita raised her Holy War Staff.

“What's wrong with that? That girl is a Blood Oath Member. Whether we boil her or roast her, we Holy War Officers can do whatever we want with her...”

“How can you… You’re the Leader of the Church...” As Justice gasped in shock, the Holy Knights also gasped and retreated. Perhaps many of them were seeing the Jikita's true nature for the first time... Fear spread in an instant.
“Move aside, Justice...”
“I-I don't want to...!”
“That goes against the qualities of a Holy War Officer... Are you sure you want to do this...?” Jikita's gaze stole a glance at Riot. The warrior demon glared at the old woman, her hand on the gun at her waist. Riot was poised to draw and fire.
But she openly sneered. Her withered hand formed a holy seal.
Understanding, Justice shouted to Sesia. “Hide behind me!”
“First strike...”
Cesia clung to the boy's back. Jikita summoned a miracle aimed at Cesia.
“Circumventing Shockwave...!”
Suddenly, a pale blue lightning bolt streaked across the sky.
The offensive miracle released from Jikita's fingers reached Justice's eyes in an instant.
“So fast...!”

Riot was overcome with fear. It was an order of magnitude faster than the same miracle summoned by Justice. It suddenly changed direction and blew Cesia's body away.
“Aaaah!”
“Cesia!” With a scream, the petite girl plunged into the mud. Riot called her name in a flash.
Is that what a church leader should do? Should she kill all enemies without asking why?
Wasn’t she supposed to be a person who served God, boasting overwhelming power in this world, the hope of the people...? Riot had no time to think about that.
Before she could think, her hand had already drawn her gun.
“What are you doing?!” The Battle Armor Demon was overcome with madness. A blind killing intent filled her entire body and exploded.
At the same time, Jikita's voice rang out. Without hesitation, Riot pulled the gun from his waist and pointed it at Zikita.
“Sky Strike!” The light bullets fired by the Holy War Officer attacked Riot one after another. There was no time to dodge. They exploded one after another, and the shock blew the Battle Armor Demon away.
“Gahhh...!” With a roar, Riott was blown away into the distance.
Immediately after, Justice erupted. “What are you doing to Riot!”
He threw down his Holy War Staff and lunged at Jikita.
But the old woman quickly jumped backward. Instead, a group of burly Holy Knights formed a shield.
“Justice, please control yourself!”
“Forgive my rudeness!”
The holy knights grabbed the boy's limbs. Justice bared his teeth and struggled in agony. “Please listen to Cesia! You...you...!”
“If you resist, I'll cut you down!” Jikita commanded the holy knights in a rough voice. “What are you fools doing? He’s an outsider! I don't care what happens to him! Hurry up and bring Cesia here! What are you dawdling for?”
Jikita approached and forcefully pushed Justice's head with her holy crusader staff.
"Anyone who sides with the Blood Oath is the same as the Blood Oath! You're no Holy War Officer! You're a Blood Oath Member! A genuine Blood Oath Member!"
His face sank into the mud. The staff slammed into the back of his head, and his consciousness faded. Even so, Justice reached out to his partner, tasting the flavor of blood.
“Don't die... Don't die... Riot...”
Raemos wiped the cold sweat from his brow.
Glancing around, he saw the Holy Knights staring at Justice. The Holy War Officer, who was supposed to protect and guide the Holy Church, was being beaten in the mud. And by the church leader, who was also a Holy War Officer...
Everyone felt awe at this unbelievable act.
“What... kind of man...!” Jikita's miracle had paralyzed Riot's electronic functions. Even so, hse caught sight of his partner through her blurred vision, and the Battle Armor Demon let out a groan.
“Justice, I'm sorry... I couldn't protect you...”
“I'm... I'm okay...” He started to say, but choked on blood. His face, covered in mud and blood, was swollen from being beaten. What was the point of him being here?

Riott bit her lip in frustration.
And Cesia, too, shed tears at the sight of Justice's pitiful state. “Justice, I... I...!”
"It's okay... There must be some reason... Otherwise, you... A girl like you couldn't possibly be a Blood Oath... That's absolutely impossible..."
Justice thought he was laughing at this baseless belief. But there was no angelic smile anywhere. Only his ugly, swollen, red-and-black face twitched.
“Justice!”
“Don't move, girl!” The holy knight grabbed for Cesia's hand.
But the girl quickly dodged him and ran away frantically.
“What are you doing? Catch her!” Raemos gave the order and started running.
“She's the assassin of Chairman Febres! Don't let her escape!”
In response, several holy knights pursued Cesia.
But while fleeing, Sesia collided head-on with silver armor. The holy knight who suddenly appeared before her instinctively held her back.
Cesia looked up at the holy knight's face. It was none other than her own best friend.
“Oh, isn't it ALena...!” Raemos rushed over, relieved.
Alena held Sesia tightly in both arms. The female knight, her golden hair flowing, smiled at the councilor who had run up. “Why, Lord Raemos, what's the matter? Running like that...?”
“Don't talk nonsense, you fool!” The councilor shouted angrily at Alena's nonchalant question. Raemos pointed trembling fingers toward Cesia. “Capture Sesia... That girl... Just... Just now...”
“Yes, I know.”
Arena smiled sweetly. “She killed Lord Febres, didn't she?”
“Yes! So hurry...” Then she swung her right arm swiftly. “Because I asked you to...!”
“GAAAAAHHHHHH!”
A beast-like death cry thundered.
Raemos clawed at his own throat with both hands. The councilor's neck had been sliced clean through by Alena's longsword.
“Raemos...” Even Jikita's voice caught in her throat.
Raemos collapsed to the ground, gurgling blood. His chest was stained a dark, murky red.
Watching his final struggle, Alena flashed a grim, satisfied smile.
“Alena, what the hell are you doing?!”
“That girl is a Blood Oath Member!” The Holy Knight who shouted was also cut down by Arena in a single stroke. A merciless, lightning-fast strike.
Jikita gritted her teeth and scattered the Holy Knights.
“What is this, Alena! Surely not...”
“It's exactly what you think it is...” Alena thrust the tip of her longsword at the old woman and declared in a strangely clear voice.
“Everything... was planned by us two... Vaslan's councilors, and everyone in key positions within the Holy Church... I'll kill them all... That's why... two years ago... I infiltrated the Holy Knight Order...”
Not only the Holy Knights, but even Jikita was speechless. At their stunned expressions, Alena let out a high, mocking laugh.
“It took a long time to get here... But it worked... We've won! I'll send all of you straight to hell!”

Riot doubted her own ears. That couldn't be true. There was no way Alena would say something like that. She doubted herself repeatedly, telling herself all of this was just a nightmare.

But Alena's voice repeated itself.

“By now, Warden’s squad is as good as dead, too.” Holding her longsword in a guard stance, Alena thundered her words of victory “I will avenge the village of Warun!”

Alena leapt into the air, and the Holy Knights swarmed to intercept her. The metallic clang of swords clashing echoed throughout the camp. Without Riot or Justice joining the fray, a bloody battle had begun.

“Prepare for the Miracle Summoning! The Evil Spirit is coming!”

As Warden shouted, an invisible wave engulfed the ground. Trees fell, and the entire village of Warun shook violently. Screaming, the Holy Knights were slammed to the ground.

“Hold on to something!” Desperately resisting the magical blast, Garcia fixed his gaze on the Blood Oath Formation. The black vortex that burst forth from the forbidden symbol grew larger and larger above the heads of the squad.

Warden also stamped his foot on the ground beneath him.

The black wave boldly revealed its true form - a mass of intertwined black serpents.

That was the initial impression. Countless snakes, each fifty meters long, seemed to writhe and appear atop the trees. But where the serpents' heads should be, there were the faces of deranged human women. All of them writhed in agony, chanting in unison. “Iooooo... Iooooo... Ooo...” The trembling human-headed bodies stretched their necks toward the holy knights below. They bared rows of fangs threatening to spill from their mouths, biting to kill in a single gulp and chewing.

There were no screams. Unable even to gasp in horror, the holy knights fell prey to the demon spirit one after another.

Crunch... slurp... crunch... The sounds of flesh crushing and bones shattering echoed. Several massive, long necks dripped blood from their lips, uttering cries of delight.

“Retreat! Summon miracles! Summon them!” But even the shouting Warden had no time to summon miracles. The three Holy War Officers who should have been there had, unnoticed, became piles of flesh.

“Run, Warden!” Garcia shouted, suddenly dropping the honorific.

“This demon spirit is beyond our power! We’re no match! Retreat!”

Warden understood this too. Not a single one could resist. Total annihilation was only a matter of time.

“Gather around me! Retreat!” The Holy War Officer raised his eyes to the Demon God looming close and shouted.

“Grant me your power... First strike!”

It was a one-sided slaughter.

“GAAAAAH!” The death cry echoed across the encampment. Alena's sword pierced yet another holy knight's neck. Striking through a gap in the sturdy armor, the blade severed the knight's lifeline.

“You traitor!” Shouting, holy knights leapt at her from both sides.

But Alena ducked just a split second faster. The very instant, she leapt vertically.

She dodged the attacks from both sides right before her eyes. The Holy Knights suddenly lost their target. She dove straight down upon their heads. Swinging her longsword wildly at both sides, she leapt back in one swift motion. The severed heads of the Holy Knights flew off, landing with a thud in the undergrowth.

“You're getting too cocky...!” Someone spat out in bitter frustration. But those words were nothing but sour grapes. Already, over twenty holy knights lay fallen in the encampment. No one even suspected that Alena possessed such skill. The holy knights could only retreat, inch by inch.

“Is that power also granted by the Demon God...?” Jikita stepped forward in her place. Behind her stood several Holy War Officers. The old woman thrust her Holy War Staff at the female knight.

“If so, it seems you've formed a blood pact with a rather high-ranking Evil Spirit...”

“I'm not a blood pact-holder...” Alena declared firmly. “This sword technique is my true power. I've hidden it for two whole years... but I kept honing my skills to take revenge on you lot...!”

"That should explain why the Holy War Staff didn't react." Jikita twisted her mouth in displeasure. "Thanks to you, everyone was deceived..."
Riot stood up at the sound of her voice. The War Armor Demon's retina had not yet recovered its function. But this was no time to be down. Beyond the numerous error messages, Riot caught sight of Alena.
"I was deceived too..." She grimaced in pain that ran through her entire body. "Cesia deceived Justice... and you deceived me..."
For a moment, the murderous intent in Alena's eyes vanished.
"I'm sorry, I... couldn't do it..."
"I want to hear the reason..." Riot said with self-mockery. "At least as compensation, I want to know that much..."
How could anyone not laugh at this?
"Watch out for Cesia."
"Cesia is the one you should be most wary of."
Riot, who had thought this, was the one who had let his guard down against Alena. He hadn't had a shred of concern. That was why she was being self-deprecating.
"I haven't heard it yet either..." Suddenly, Justice stood up too.
"Explain it to me too, Cesia... Why are you... involved in something like this... something so terrible..." The mud-covered boy asked Cesia, who stood far away. His swollen face twisted strangely.
He was trying to smile. Tears spilled from Cesia's eyes as she watched Justice cling to his Holy War staff.
"I don't want to do this either! I didn't want to do something this terrible! Wh-!"
"Cesia!" Shouting behind her, Alena regained her fighting spirit. "This is righteous revenge! Have you forgotten about Warun Village? Have you forgotten about OUR village?"
The Holy Knights flinched at the name. Hidden for two whole years... Alena's words resonated in everyone's hearts. Understanding, Jikita narrowed her eyes.
"Are you... survivors of Warun Village...?"
Cesia nodded. Alena also turned her gaze back and spat at Jikita.
"Yes, that's right! We are survivors of Warun Village, which you, the Holy Church and the Council, joined forces to slaughter!"
Riot looked at her partner. Justice also looked at the Battle Armor Demon.
Both of them felt a powerful, unfathomable rage behind those words.
"I see. How unfortunate..." Jikita exhaled deeply and spoke sympathetically. "So that's why you made us your enemies... But we had no choice... If all the villagers had been infected with the biological weapon... At that time, burning them was the only option..."
"That's right," said one of the Holy Knights, stepping forward. "I took part in the burning at the time, and even now, I still think it was the only option..."
Voices of agreement rippled through the holy knights like waves.
But Alena shook her golden hair wildly and cried out.
"Remember clearly, everyone!" The female knight's eyes glistened with pleading. "Were the villagers you killed truly sick? Were there really people bedridden? Was the biological weapon even recovered?"
The Holy Knights froze in unison.

Riot scanned their stunned faces. Every one of them had turned pale, recalling the scene from two years ago and the murderous intent that had flared in Alena's eyes.
No one dared contradict her words.
“All of it... was a cover-up!” The female knight screamed, glaring at Jikita. The old woman maintained her magnanimous smile.
“What an amusing thing to say, child...”
“Don't try to deceive me... I know what happened in that village...” Lifting the tip of her blade, Alena closed in on the old woman. Assessing the distance, the knight locked her aim on Jikita. “If you knew what the Holy Church and the Council did in our village... if you knew they burned it down to hide their crimes... anyone would do this!”
“Stop it, Alena!” But Riot's words came too late.
Raising her blade of vengeance, Arena leapt toward Jikita. It was a fierce sword, moving at breakneck speed like a gust of wind.
“No, Arena!”
“Arena!” Justice and Sesia cried out in unison.
As if to shake off their screams, Jikita also formed a holy seal at lightning speed.
“Raging Wind Blade Light Strike!”
In less than a second, the miracle reversed from her fingertips.
Countless crescent-shaped attack miracles danced wildly from Jikita's holy seal. Their trajectories drew curves as they attacked Alena from all sides.
"Dieeeeeee!!!” Swinging her sword midair, she shattered the first strike.
But a pale blue light darted in from her left blind spot, piercing deep into Alena's shoulder. It shattered her shoulder guard with force, sinking further into her flesh. The offensive miracle exploded inside her body, violently tearing off Arena's left arm.
“GAAAAAH!”
“Alenaaaah!” Covered in the female knight's blood, Riot shouted once more. “Stop it!”
Cesia also covered her face and knelt down.
Justice stared blankly at Alena's left arm, which had been blown away.
But it wasn't over yet. Gripping her longsword with her right hand, Alena fell toward Jikita. Her silver armor was stained bright red with her own blood. Still, she charged forward. The female knight continued to roar with vengeance.
“You're responsible for everyone's deaths! I won't forgive you! I won't forgive you! I’ll kill you! I’LL KILL YOU!” Her blood-stained face loomed closer.
Even Jikita's face contorted with fear.
But a new wave of attack miracles swarmed toward Alena.
“Skyfall!”
Now it was the Holy War Officers' turn. Holding back behind Jikita, they simultaneously summoned miracles. That rapid-fire barrage of lightning pierced Arena's entire body. Blood spattered, flesh exploded. The female knight fell lifelessly to the ground.
Alena, now little more than a rag, had no strength left to move even a finger.
“A... Alena...” Riot stared blankly at her friend.
Yes, Alena was, indeed, her friend.
An irreplaceable friend, forged in just a few days.

And now, Alena didn't move a muscle.
Riot desperately fought back the lump rising in his throat.
“Don't let your guard down. Finish her off.”
Jikita commanded the holy knights.
“She made me a bit worked up... but she was never my match.” Yet the old woman spoke while breathing heavily, her shoulders heaving. Her holy war staff glistened with sweat. Something terrified Jikita. To confirm it, Riot stepped closer to her friend.
“Riot-sama, what are you...?”
Pushing aside the calling holy knights, Riot lifted the female knight into his arms.
Blood-soaked Arena let a faint breath and words escape her lips.
“I... thought I could win...”
“...”
Riot remained silent.
She wiped the blood from Arena's moaning face. Behind her, Cesia also rushed over.
"Because... that bitch... could use miracles... I had no choice but to rely on magic... I couldn't trust gods... or miracles..."
“What did Jikita do?” Riot gripped the knight's hand and shook it forcefully. “What do you know? What did the Church and the Council do? Why do you know?”
“...Th-that...” Alena desperately tried to force out a voice. But her soul was already preparing to journey to the underworld.
“Alena, you...”
“Lord Riott, finish her!” The approaching holy knight cried sharply.
“She's a minion of the Evil God! Kill her now!” Jikita and the others advanced.
But Riot hammered her words with rage erupting from every fiber of his being.
“Don't interfere!” Her tone brooked no argument.
“She was my friend! Yet she deceived me! Until I hear her reason for deceiving me, I will not let anyone kill her!”
“Riot...” Behind her, Cesia collapsed, weeping. The warrior demon sent a powerful gaze to the girl apologizing.
"All right, later you too... apologize to Justice..." Then, Alena's breathing suddenly became weak. Her breath changed, becoming like a hoarse whistle.
“Ri... Ot...” She couldn't make any more sound.
Riot braced herself and asked. “What you know, Cesia knows too...?”
Without a word, Alena nodded slightly. Smiling, Riot nodded back.
“I understand. I'll ask Cesia for all the reasons... So you can rest assured... and die in peace...”
Alena smiled and closed her eyes. Her entire body went limp, her temperature dropping rapidly. Riot gently laid her friend's body down on the ground.
“Goodbye... Alena...” She had never seen a warrior cling to an enemy even after having an arm torn off. Such fury could not be allowed to be buried meaninglessly.
Riot took that desire for revenge from Alena and quietly stood up.
“Cesia... You can tell me, right?” She spoke the words to confirm. “The thing Arena couldn't tell me... The thing Alena wanted to tell me... Tell me now, here...”
“Riot...” Behind her, Cesia stood up. Then, a small boy approached the two of them.
“I... want to hear it too...”

Justice stepped forward, leaning on his Holy War Staff. He looked down at the cold body of Alena and formed the Holy Seal. Then, he sadly fluttered his eyelashes.
“Why did you do this... I need to know that much... Otherwise, I... I'll have to kill you right now...”
“Justice...”
“Because I'm a Holy War Officer...” The boy spoke to Sesia without wiping away his overflowing tears. “Ever since I was a child, I've trained relentlessly to fight the Evil Spirits and their Blood Allies... I can't just let this slide...”
“...”
"But just this one thing — you deceiving me... Tell me a reason so that I might forgive you... I might even forgive Alena's lie too... At least give me that chance... won't you?"
Cesia looked around. Several holy knights lay fallen. And Febres, Raemos... even Alena had breathed her last. The camp was saturated with the scent of blood. It was all their fault. But that smell had also filled the village of Warun that day.
“I... I'll tell you...” Cesia clenched her dagger and made up her mind. "I don't expect you to forgive me, Justice... but I want you and Lady Riot to hear... why we did this..."
The Holy Knights held their breath and listened intently.
Cesia began her confession to the boy.
“Actually, in our village...”
“Cesia, look out!”
“Storm God Strike Summon!”
Several screams overlapped.
Riot was the first to notice Jikita's holy seal. The church leader had, unbeknownst to anyone, concentrated her consciousness and summoned a miracle to her Holy War Staff.
“Shut up, you little brat!” Jikita swung her Holy War Staff at Sesia. The detonated miracle instantly transformed into a tornado and rapidly approached the girl.
“Aaaah!” Countless torn blades of grass flew up along with clumps of dirt. There was no time for the startled Cesia to dodge. Without thinking, Justice reached out to the girl.
“Cesia!” But the offensive miracle mercilessly blew Cesia's slender body away. Screaming, Cesia was thrown away.
“Guh...” The girl's body bounced repeatedly. A low groan escaped from Cesia's mouth as she was slammed into the ground. Then she didn't move at all.
In that instant, the Battle Armor Demon exploded with rage.
“I'll kill you!”
“Not if we stop you!”
Riot drew her pistol, while Jikita thrust her Holy War Staff forward. At point-blank range, they locked their weapons onto each other.
“Not if we stop you... Not if you make us say it... Not here... Not in front of my men... Not if you make us say it...!” Jikita spat out the words, her voice thick with lies.
The holy knights retreated sharply at her fierce demeanor. They too had realized the church leader was more than just a holy war officer.
“You...!”

“Say whatever you like...” Jikita made her holy war staff glow, forcibly silencing Riot's groan. "There are things in this world you shouldn't know... ...Things you're better off not hearing... And this girl goes and blabs..."
Riot put her finger on the trigger.
Even if a miracle was summoned right in front of her, she could still put a bullet in Jikita's forehead. More than anything else, she had to kill this old woman.
Prepared for mutual destruction, the Battle Armor Demon decided on his target.
But for a moment, he looked away.
Behind her, Justice was holding up the fallen Sesia. “Cesia! Hold on, Cesia!”
“Jus...tice...” Cesia, groaning from the shock, reached her trembling hand toward the sky. Grasping her fingertips, Justice summoned a healing miracle.
“Sacred Light Healing Array...” Warm light overflowed from the boy's hand, flowing into Cecilia's wounds like a trailing ribbon. In an instant, Cecilia's hand twitched.
"Justice... I..." Feeling her fading life return, Cesia clung to the boy.
But Justice sharply turned his gaze away. “You want to hide it that badly, huh...”
Shielding Cesia with his back, the boy stood up, his Holy War Staff in hand.
"You committed such terrible crimes two years ago... And now, you're trying to silence those who try to expose you..."
“...”
“I will absolutely make Cesia tell. And I will make the Holy Knights here know... All of your evil deeds...”
Jikita finally squeezed out a word. “...Really now...?”
The old woman still had her sights set on Cesia. “I can still cast attack miracles... You have limits to your healing, don't you? After all, it's the difference in power between us as Holy War Officers... I will win...”
“Before that, I will make you tell... No, I will make you tell...”
Justice took a deep breath and pressed his lips together.
He quietly declared his second strike.
"Nightmare Repelling Formation...”
An immense holy light exploded in the gloomy swamp.
The holy knights, and Sesia, lowered their eyes.
Even the Battle Armor Demon was momentarily stunned by the intensity of the light.
Only Jikita understood the boy's intention. She hurriedly tried to strike him.
But it was too late. The time of reckoning had begun...

Suddenly, the surrounding scenery changed dramatically.
The morning mist camp was nowhere to be seen. In fact, Justice and the others were nowhere to be seen either. The land suddenly spread out around her, and vines crawled at her feet. In the forest, which was nothing but darkness, Riot was alone.
“Justice!” The trees swayed eerily, buffeted by strong winds. She had been here before. Just as she felt that sense of déjà vu, a strong smell pierced her nostrils.
(Burning smell...?) The moment she realized it, the scenery shifted.
The giant trees around her flowed backward at tremendous speed while Riot hadn't moved a step, but as if she were sprinting through the forest at full speed, the wind slapped the War Armor Demon's cheek.
(A village...?)

At the end of her gaze, huge red flames were burning. The flames, floating in the darkness, enveloped many houses and engulfed the settlement.
Then she realized.
(The village of Warun...! This forest has been attacked by an evil spirit... Then this scene is from Sesia's memory...)
Riot's gaze was suddenly pulled deep into the village. The inferno raging all around struggled to completely consume the village. Riot could even feel the heat from the flying sparks.
But she didn't care about the heat. Before Riot's eyes, fleeing villagers were being hacked down by a group of attackers and tossed one after another into the flames. There was no distinction between old and young, male and female. Blades fell indiscriminately, striking those who fled or cried for help. A dark pool of blood formed at Riot's feet.
"Stop it! Stop this!" Riot's voice carried no weight. Yet she couldn't stop screaming. Before the War Armor Demon's eyes, a pregnant woman was slashed down, an old man shot dead. The roar could not be stopped.
"Why are you doing this?! Who do you think you are?! What gives you the right?!"
The attackers numbered likely dozens. All were cloaked in darkness, faces hidden behind quarantine masks. But the armor they wore was familiar.
One of them pointed at Riot and suddenly bellowed.
"There's another one! Show no mercy, even to children!" Riot locked eyes with the voice's owner. Their gazes collided. A pair of sharp eyes glared at Riot.
"Garcia, you...!" The Holy Knight Commander swung his longsword down from above.
Riot tried to dodge the blow. Simultaneously, he reached out, attempting to crush the carotid artery.
But it all ended there. With the woman's scream, the vision cut off, and utter darkness enveloped the surroundings. The village and the flames were extinguished.
Everything ended in this single instant.

"This is..."
Warden's teeth chattered.
Garcia was speechless.
The Holy Knights standing behind him had also been inside the burning village of Warun. They had just now escaped the ruins of Warun Village using a teleportation miracle. They should have reached the campsite.
But the area was a whirlpool of screams and wails.
For Garcia, for the holy knights, it was a memory of their own past actions.
"It's a curse!" One holy knight couldn't bear it and screamed.
"This is a curse on us! The resentment from back then is calling us! We're cursed!"
"Don't talk nonsense!" Garcia yelled, slapping the knight across the cheek.
Yet before their eyes, the slaughter continued endlessly.
"Warden, what in the name of the gods is this?!" Garcia shook the stunned Holy War Officer violently.
"Didn't we come back? Didn't we return to Lady Jikita?" But Warden did not respond.
Instead, he muttered the same words over and over between clenched lips. The holy knight's spine froze at those words.

“A curse... It really is a curse...”

“Warden...” Garcia understood this man for the first time. It wasn't just the weight of the operation that had been crushing the Holy War Officer. A demon god dwells in the village we massacred in the past... Upon learning this, Warden had come to see his own actions as sin. That was not justice after all... He should not have killed them... He was the one who deserved judgment... Even if the enemy was an evil spirit... That self-reproach tormented Warden. And now, here, it was driving him mad.

“Warden, you...” Garcia snapped back to reality, calling his name. He had no intention of indulging Warden's panic. Garcia grabbed the Holy War Officer by the collar and slammed his raw anger into his face.

“Hey! Answer me, Warden!” Anxiety and fear exposed the true nature of the Holy Knight. “I'm calling you! Answer me!” He clenched his fist, ready to strike.

But Garcia froze. Warden slowly turned his ashen face and spoke.

“I have questions for you, Garcia...”

“Wh-what do you...” Against the backdrop of the burning village, Warden's face was rigid as a mask. Then suddenly...
The Holy War Officer smiled faintly. “What on earth is this...?”
“That's for us to...!”
“At that time, I was outside the village...” Ignoring the Holy Knight's words, Warden's thoughts drifted back two years. "Take command outside the village... Yes, it was a strict order from Lady Jikita... ...That's why I only learned this now..."
The Holy War Officer began surveying the surroundings with calm detachment. The Holy Knights led by Garcia slaughtered the villagers one after another. They spared no one who fled, even cutting down those who begged for mercy.
And once more, Warden demanded. “Where are the sick... where... are those infected by the biological weapon... Ah... tell me...” Villagers fled, struggled, resisted.
There was no one here who deserved to be killed. Garcia stammered involuntarily.
“Th-that...”
“You answer me, Garcia!” It was thunderous fury.
The Warden shoved Garcia aside and thrust his Holy War Staff at him. “What part of this is a village of the sick! Why must they die! The justice I believed in... there isn’t a single shred of it here! Answer me, Garcia! Answer me right here, right now!”
It wasn't the voice of a madman. Warden had regained his senses and was confronting his own guilt head-on. “Who deceived me... No... Who deceived the people of Vaslan... Answer me, Garcia... Answer me!”
The screams pierced the hearts of the holy knights. In the center of Warun Village, human corpses piled up like firewood. Garcia from two years ago smiled at that inferno. Raemos from two years ago was also satisfied with the mission's results.
Suddenly, Warden laughed in resignation. “I see... It truly is a curse...”
Sparks danced wildly behind him.
Watching this, Warden declared. “To conceal such evil deeds... We cannot live in peace... It is a curse... We are sinners... deserving of this curse...”
Warden let out a loud, booming laugh.
It echoed endlessly into the night sky above the burning village of Warun

【Chapter 5: Yob Zolan / Conclusion】

“My family... and Alena's family...” Standing frozen beyond the flames, Cesia held back tears as she confessed. “That day, we were all suffering from Zil Yellow Fever. It's a true epidemic that every child in Guiana catches...” Cesia continued to stare into her memories. “We were in the forest quarantine hut that night. We found it suspicious that our meal hadn't arrived... So I, who had recovered relatively well... went back to the village to check.”
“And I saw what you see now...” Riot also stared at the flames and bit her lip. “They were cut down by Garcia in the village and thrown into the flames. Alive...”
“They stayed like that for a whole day...” Cesia trembled at the terror of the past and nearly collapsed on the spot. Justice held her shoulders firmly and embraced her.
“But Alena saved you, didn't she?” Cesia closed her eyes, trembling in Justice's arms.
“Alena said... she would take revenge... She said she would never forgive those who killed our family...”

“But I heard that Warun Village was contaminated with biological weapons...” Riot turned her sharp gaze in another direction.
Beyond the flames stood Jikita. The Holy Knights were there. The Battle Armor Demon pointed her finger straight at the group.
“Once you learned these guys were the source of the rumors... you deliberately went into hiding at the Holy Church.”
“Alena originally wanted to become a Holy Knight.” Cesia strongly appealed to the dying wish of her friend. “She trained with Father in swordsmanship, vowing she'd absolutely become a Holy Knight. But the moment she learned it was the Holy Knights who burned our village...”
“She joined forces with the Evil Spirits...” Jikita confirmed in a resigned voice.
Cesia nodded, then turned back to face the Church Leader with unwavering resolve.
“Alena said... our enemy uses miracles... so clinging to God is useless... let's cling to the Evil God... if it means we can get revenge, then so be it...”
Riot recalled Alena's final moments. She thought she could win... those words now filled her with regret. If only they had met sooner, perhaps they could have stopped her...
“Alena was desperate... She tried to infiltrate the core of the Knights to uncover the truth... She truly strove as a Holy Knight... I also tried hard to obtain information, but... I wasn't as eager for revenge as Alena was...”
The wind blew past. The flames died down, and the darkness receded. The miracle of Justice, which had reflected Cesia's past, finally lost its power. Everyone was once again gathered on the grassland of the camp.
“Well, I suppose I should tell you what happened next...” The old woman's voice echoed. Having given up, Jikita began to speak in a gentle tone. “It was a terrible thing to do... But for our sake, every single person in that village had to die...”
Riot unleashed her fury. “There's no reason any villager had to die!”
“There was a reason...” Jikita's voice sighed deeply. "That village had a factory... a secret drug refinery that couldn't be run openly... It was a good factory. It produced twenty tons of amphetamine-type hallucinogens a month..." The old woman continued, her words tinged with nostalgia. “No matter which underground organization we supplied, it brought in enormous profits. Thanks to that, the management lived in luxury for ten years.”
“And that management...”
“Me and Febres... No, it'd be more precise to say the Holy Church and the Council...” Jikita calmly gave a terrifying answer to Riott's question. “It couldn't be helped. The only resource around here is natural gas. And we knew it would be depleted in thirty years. So we needed an alternative source of income.”
Justice's face clearly paled. “But hallucinogens...!”
“There's no law against selling them on the New Continent. Besides, in this gloomy swamp, sometimes you need something to cling to, something to get high on. We just secretly helped them do that.”
Justice gripped his holy war staff tightly. Cesia looked down, and the holy knights wept bitterly. Riot felt sickened by the sophistry. Indulging in hallucinogens only hastens one's own death - and it often leads to killing others and stealing their money and valuables to feed the craving.
The War Armor Demon looked at the old woman with contempt.

“But you guys, that factory...”
“That's right, we decided to close up shop. We were about to be found out.”
“By who, exactly...?”
“The Twelve Popes.” Jikita clicked her tongue in frustration. "No matter how experienced I am, they're different. I'm not stupid enough to keep running a dangerous business while they're watching us. So I decided to wipe everything out before the inspection team arrived."
“What...!” Justice was speechless. Jikita no longer had any intention of hiding her crime. Her defiance stunned and outraged everyone.
Rage poured out of Riot like steam. “You really are a selfish old hag! The people of this domain don't live for you!”
“You're such a fool. We're the ones keeping the people alive.” Jikita laughed mockingly at her fury. "The drug factory's profits accounted for 40% of the nation's income. Vaslan was practically running on drugs. Everyone lived off the drug money. You should be grateful." Jikita laughed repeatedly. “We were just planning to build a new factory somewhere else. If we didn't, this country wouldn't be able to survive...”
“How terrible...” Justice grimaced. “Even if it's for the people...!”
“The New Continent isn't blessed enough to have other options. Justice, you're not just a pilgrim either... You know what this world is like, don't you?”
Justice froze at that question. Countless horrific experiences crushed the boy's resistance.
Jikita, satisfied, flashed a triumphant smile.
“Or would you rather hundreds of thousands starve to death?”
“...”
“If you have nothing to say, then get out of the way... You're getting in the way of hunting down the Blood Allies.”
New power surged into Jikita's hand as she gripped the Holy War Staff.
But Riot...
Riot alone stood directly in Jikita's way. With a fearless smile, the Battle Armor Demon openly insulted the old woman. “What self-sacrifice? That's laughable...”
“Machine Woman, step out of the...”
“I'm sick and tired of listening to your cowardly excuses, you bigwigs.”
Cutting off Jikita, Riot glared at her with a mocking gaze.
"If you believe you're right, why not lay bare the truth without hiding anything? It's precisely because you can't do that you tried to kill Cesia. In the end, you just love yourself too much."
“Shut up, you little brat...”
“For the people, for the greater good... The ones who say that are always the ones who come out unscathed. Self-sacrifice? You must be joking! What kind of wounds do you have in your heart? What kind of sacrifices have you made?!”
Riot's angry voice shook the grasslands. Her determination not to retreat a single step spurred her on, with Justice and Cesia behind her.
Jikita trembled as she formed the Holy Seal. “If you interfere, both you and Justice will die together...”
“I won't let that happen, Jikita...” The Battle Armor Demon raised her pistol once more. “Before I judge Sesia's sins, I'll judge you. You probably won't be happy that I'm

the one judging you, though." Her combat abilities hadn't recovered. She wasn't confident she could still fight. Still, she gripped the gun. It was stubbornness.
"Someone take care of this machine woman..." Jikita glared at Riot as she gave orders to those around her. Anyone will do... You've already killed so many from Warun Village... One more here now... The Creator God will forgive you..."
Unease spread among the Holy Knights. Even if Jikita had a dark side, they lacked the strength to defy her. They had no choice but to obey. But to strike down Cesia... .
It happened the instant everyone hesitated.
A gale swept through the encampment.
The grassland writhed, and a faint holy light flickered at the group's center. It transformed into a sequence of ancient sacred characters, instantly reshaping into a circular array.
"Warden!" Everyone cried out, speechless. The Holy War Officer who appeared was accompanied by Garcia and several Holy Knights. Every suit of armor was stained with blood, and every face was contorted with terror.
"What happened? The others..."
"They're all dead, Lady Jikita!" Interrupting the Church Leader, Garcia stepped out of the sacred circle. The holy knight pointed impatiently toward the distant marsh.
"There was a monstrous Demon God in Warun Village! Now it's heading this way..."
All eyes followed Garcia's outstretched finger. Beneath the gray sky, forests lay layered upon one another, stretching endlessly. From one of those forests...
A black tornado rose into the air.
The ominous, raging whirlwind grew larger, gradually approaching the camp. Then, a dreadful voice, shaking the marsh, echoed throughout the area.
"Iooooo... Iooooo... Ooooo... Iooooo... Iooooo... Ooooo... Iah... Yob Zoran... Iah, Iah... Yob Zoran..."
Riot looked up into the sky. The tornado swelled with terrifying force, spiraling closer. Then, the jet-black vortex roared and extended outward in all directions. The torrent of darkness revealed its true form.
"Iayob Zoran…Ia, Iayob Zoran…" At the earth-shaking groan, the Logta horses pulling the covered wagon foamed at the mouth and bolted wildly. A giant, intertwined human head and serpent body. It descended upon the camp in one fell swoop, emitting a strange cry.
"Magical energy release... 520 I. You've got to be kidding me, it's a Demon Lord-class!" Riot drew the great sword from his back.
A Demon Lord refers to the seventh rank among the twelve ranks of Demon Gods. Although it was a mid-level demon god, it rarely appeared in the human world.
"Yob Zoran..." Cesia trembled in Justice's arms. "The demon god Yob Zoran... The one Alena formed a blood pact with... It's a Demon God!"
A deafening roar echoed. The snake-bodied creature slammed into the ground, crushing the covered wagon and blowing away the canopy. Then, it lunged at the countless corpses scattered across the ground, devouring them at breakneck speed.
"Alena!" Sesia called out the name of her best friend, who was no longer there.
The head of the frenzied evil spirit, Yob Zoran, tore Alena's corpse from the ground. With the sound of bones cracking, the evil god chewed the corpse violently.
"Get back, Cesia!"

Justice jumped, carrying the girl.
The evil spirit that had overtaken the camp devoured the corpses one after another. It wasn't just Alena. Febres, Raemos, the holy knights... All were swallowed whole.
Riot was speechless at the sight. “This thing!” With each corpse it devoured, lightning flashed around the evil god, and its body writhed strangely. Then, in the next moment, the number of human heads and snake bodies increased.
“It's not complete yet!” Protected by the Holy Knights as they retreated, Jikita shouted the warning. “Take it down now! Form your formation, quickly!”
At her command, the Vaslan Holy Knights formed an unyielding circular formation. Holy Knights lined the front, with Holy War Officers standing by at the flanks.
But Warden, his face contorted, yelled at his subordinates.
“No good! Run!” He raised both hands, foam flying from his mouth. “They're no match for us! Everyone mount up and get out of here!” Some Holy Knights fled without needing to be told. They were the ones who had escaped from Warun Village alongside Warden. It was only natural. They thought they'd finally escaped, only to be pursued again. It was no wonder they were panicking.
“H-help meee!” It was a scream unbecoming of a holy knight.
Simultaneously, a series of explosions echoed. The sound of human skulls shattering.
The tops of fleeing holy knights split clean in two, fountains of blood spilling forth. Faces cracked open, eyeballs blown out. The headless holy knights collapsed to their knees, then fell backward, dead.
“What the...” Even Riot was speechless.
It had been a slaughter lasting barely a dozen seconds. And these were the Holy Knights, renowned for their one-against-a-thousand prowess, specialists in slaying evil spirits. Then, from those shattered skulls, brain matter rose, dripping blood. The eerie pulp was enveloped in a crimson, magical light.
The Demon God lunged at the brains, devouring them with relish. Even Jikita paled at the spattering blood.
“Hidden Offensive Barrier!” The remaining Holy War Officers chanted in unison.
A defensive miracle, colored like the evening sky, instantly unfolded in the air. Crashing into the fiery barrier, the Demon God let out a bloodcurdling scream.
“Everyone, activate Miracle Amplification! Don't retreat a single step!”
Jikita raised her Holy Seal, screaming in anguish.
But the demon god continued its charge. It lunged forward, snapping the head of a front-line Holy Knight in its fangs. Blood and brain matter spilled out. Another was slammed into the earth in quick succession.
“You bastard!” Jikita roared, igniting holy light at the tip of her holy war staff. Light halos spread like ripples, shaking the surrounding air.
“Dark Queen's Thunderous Advance!” The moment the incantation ended, darkness detonated above Jikita's head. The accumulated power of countless miracles expanded and exploded in the blink of an eye. The blast and shockwave engulfed everyone nearby.
“What...!” Riot endured the blast with astonishment. Justice also held Cesia and threw himself to the ground.
The miracle that appeared took human form and flew above the camp. Its size was unmatched even by the Evil Spirit.

“Eevraiiii!” A woman dressed in an aesthetic costume raised both hands and let out a shrill scream. At the moment of her scream, several streams of plasma erupted from the Queen's entire body. The speeding lightning struck, burned, and crushed the Evil Spirit Yob Zoran.
“Zem! Zolan!”
“Aaaah! Aaaah!” Justice covered his mouth against the strong, pungent smell. The evil spirit's body was burning. Cheers erupted from all around at the sight of the evil god writhing and screaming.
“Don't give up! Jikita will win!” The heads of the evil gods, torn off by plasma, fell to the ground. The Holy Knights charged forward at the sound of the evil spirit' shrill screams. But once they had stopped the evil spirit, Jikita turned to Sesia with a desperate look on her face.
“Garcia, kill that girl!” It was a merciless order. “That girl is a survivor from Warun Village! She's the one who set the trap for us! Cut her down quickly and finish her off!”
Justice stiffened at the order. Cesia clung to the boy in a flash.
“This way, Cesia!” Shouting, the boy ran out onto the grassland. He sprinted with Sesia in his arms, intending to leave her in the forest behind him. But from behind, a murderous intent pressed down on him.
“Stop, you brats!” Justice turned around without thinking. Garcia was already closing in on him. It was a furious, storm-like charge. There was no trace of his usual smirk on his face. Flashing his long sword from his waist, the silver holy knight let out a thunderous roar.
“You little brat...!” The blade of Zodanium holy steel fell from above. Justice, still holding Sesia, leapt sideways. He dodged the blow. But Garcia was quick, thrusting his blade in pursuit.
“Justice!” Cesia clung to the boy. It was cruel to ask the wounded Justice to dodge the Sarg-style sword technique twice. The tip of the blade reached right before her eyes. Cesia instinctively closed her eyes.
“Guh...!” But just as the slash was about to connect, Garcia grimaced in agony.
A blade had forcibly stopped the long sword's thrust.
It was indeed a Zodanium sword. It was the twin swords of the Battle Armor Demon, Riot.
“You're a trickster too, Garcia...” Gripping the blade back, Riot bared her fangs. "If you'd been two seconds later, I wouldn't have made it either... I thought you were just fooling around... You're pretty skilled, aren't you...?"
“You couldn't see through my fake eyes, huh?” They separated for a moment, then clashed swords again. With their blades locked together, the two locked eyes, filled with rage.
“Sorry, but I'm going to kill Cesia... Move out of the way!”
“You killed Cesia's family... No, you burned Cesia herself to death once! She can't be killed twice!”
Behind them, Justice also raised his voice in condemnation. “Why are you killing Cesia now!”
The boy shouted, keeping an eye on the movements of the Evil Spirit.
The Holy Knights did not break their circle.

The Vaslan warriors held back the Evil Spirit with their interception miracles and swung their Zodanium swords boldly. The Evil Spirit, attempting to unleash further magic, retreated, waiting for the moment to strike.
“Now is the time to join forces and defeat the Evil Spirit! Why are you obeying the Church Leader's orders?”
“Well, I owe her a debt of gratitude...” Garcia replied with a fearless smile. “Thanks to working alongside Lady Jikita all this time, I became the leader of the group... I've sucked up a lot of good stuff... But I still want to suck up more good stuff...” In a calm voice, the Holy Knight thrust his sword forward. "I'll kill Sesia... Justice, I'll kill you too... And I'll kill Riot as well... ...Then there will be no one left to blame us... Life will go on as before... I'll be able to suck up even more sweet juice..." With a cold expression, Garcia declared, then slashed straight ahead.
Riot swung his greatsword, and Justice leapt back. The swords of Zodanium clashed, scattering sparks. The strength of the Battle Armor Demon forcefully pushed Garcia back.
“Damn it, a machine woman!” Taking a moment to regain his distance, Garcia spat. “Coming out now to seek revenge... Thanks a lot for the trouble... You should have just kept your mouth shut and lived quietly!” He leapt again, slashing forward. But Riot's blade deflected Garcia's tip, instantly turning the tables. The thick blade fell, aiming for the top of his skull.
Yet, just before the counterattack, Garcia stepped back sharply, licking his lips. It was a fluid movement, almost elegant.
“With skills like that...!” The Armored Demon gripped the greatswords in both hands even tighter. “So you were Jikita's lackey, scheming in the shadows...”
“In the end, I'm no different from Cesia...” Garcia smiled, almost mockingly. "To fool those Holy War Officers who know nothing... lulling them into complacency was best... Everyone played along so nicely... Believing me to be nothing but a womanizing, washed-up Knight Commander..." But, Garcia declared, lowering his sword. "No matter how foolish I appeared... It was Lady Jikita's patronage that allowed me to endure... I kept thinking that someday I would reveal my true identity... and surprise everyone... I would make them gasp... That time is now... Now, I will kill Cesia... I will rise above the Holy War Officers... I'm done fawning over incompetents like Warden!”
The Armored Demon simply stared at Garcia's roar. Justice, for some reason, gazed sadly at the Holy Knight Commander. But the one he was glaring at angrily was Warden himself, the man who had been cursed.
“Garcia, you bastard...” Warden's sallow face turned even paler. Seeing his subordinate's true face for the first time, he was speechless for a moment.
But Garcia had not a shred of sympathy for the stunned Holy Knight. “Heh heh... Mr. Warden... I wish you hadn't been excluded from the group... Then you could have enjoyed the good life under Lady Jikita...”
“You're human trash...!” Warden finally managed to squeeze out a voice. “How dare you go so far for your own desires... You have no qualifications to be a Holy Knight!”
“Then do you?!” Ignoring the evil spirit's roar, Garcia unleashed his raw anger. "Don't make me laugh! What are you relying on? Not money or power! You're relying on drugs!"

Warden froze at those words. Riot was puzzled for a moment, but then he understood.
Only Justice remained unconvinced and questioned Garcia.

"Wh-what do you mean..."

"It means that you, too, are benefiting from us!" Ignoring the boy, Garcia hurled abuse at Warden. "You use hallucinogens to distract yourself from your worries and anxieties about Warun Village, don't you! Those drugs are the ones we sold! You're living off our scraps! Don't talk down to us!"

Cesia instinctively covered her mouth. Riot remembered too. The medicine bottles that were always around Warden. They weren't stomach medicine. They were a type of hallucinogen so vicious it turned your face the color of dirt.

"I..." Warden slumped for a moment, overcome by the abuse.

In that moment, Garcia leaped towards Cesia. "Dieeeee!"

Riot turned her gun barrel toward Garcia.

Justice also threw himself forward, trying to summon a final miracle. But...

"Giiiiii!!!"

"Garcia!" Riot took a step forward, aiming to slash at the evil spirit's neck. But Warden stopped her.

The evil spirit's fangs pierced Garcia's torso multiple times. The holy knight let out a pitiful scream as his own blood flowed from his stomach. "Lady J-Jikita!" Another neck tore through the outstretched arm. The faces of the deranged women swarmed, drooling as they devoured Garcia.

"G-Garcia...!" Jikita could only watch as her trusted lieutenant breathed her last. The holy knights stood stunned by the death of their commander. After sucking Garcia's brain matter, the evil spirit Yob Zoran spawned two more human-headed snakes.

Justice averted Cesia's gaze from the gruesome scene. He held her close to his chest, never letting go of the girl. However, as a Holy War Officer, he had to question Cesia.

"Cesia, I want you to answer honestly..."

"...Yes..."

"You didn't form a blood pact with the Evil God, did you?"

The girl agreed emphatically. "Alena created a blood pact formation in the village. We tried to form a blood pact there... but it was impossible... The evil spirit demanded one hundred and eight brains as payment."

"So Alena..."

"She infiltrated the councilors' homes and drew the blood pact formation..."

Cesia vividly recalled that moment, her entire body trembling with terror.

"She opened a gate from another world and fed the Demon God the brain matter... She thought it didn't matter since she was going to kill them anyway for revenge. And to lure everyone to Warun Village, she deliberately caused strange phenomena..."

The girl's trembling did not stop. But her fear was not of the Evil Spirit, but of the memory of Alena that had been revived.

"Alena... was wrong... To go that far for revenge... I tried to stop her... but she wouldn't listen."

"What was the purpose of luring them to Warun Village?"

"The closer to the Blood Oath, the stronger the power of the Evil Spirit... Plus, Vaslan was already on guard... She said she would gather the leaders of the Holy Church all at once and kill them all..."

"That's enough," Justice said, looking down.

It was Alena who had been used. She was forced to help collect the brain matter as payment, and ultimately died. After all, the Evil Spirit was not something Alena could handle.

"Riot, take care of Cesia..." Justice called out his partner's name. "I have to... defeat the Evil Spirit. I want you to protect her."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Riot looked up at the Evil Spirit, gripping her two greatswords. The Holy Knights' resistance was blocking its advance, but the Evil Spirit Yob Zoran was becoming more and more solid. The Armored Demon turned her gaze back to the wounded boy.

“You plan to call forth another miracle with that body? If you fail, there will be no second chance! And besides...” Riot started to speak, but faltered.

Justice had already healed Cesia and restored her memories. All that remained was the final blow. If he summoned another miracle...

But the boy shook his head. “Don't worry about me!” Justice handed Sesia's body to his partner. “Right now, defeating the Evil Spirit is the priority! Besides, I'm... a Holy War Officer!” The boy looked down at his hands. “No matter how much they doubt me, if I defeat the Evil Spirit right before their eyes, the misunderstanding will be cleared up... I believe that. Fighting is the only way I have to prove myself...”

Cesia, who knew nothing, couldn't understand those words.

But Riot, who understood, had no choice but to agree. No matter how much he shouted his title, he would not be respected. To earn trust, one must act.

Then there was only one thing left for him to do.

“Alright. But I'm helping too.”

“Riot...”

“Well, of course! I'm your partner, aren't I?” Smiling, the Battle Armor Demon tapped her temple. Her retinal display still hadn't returned to normal. Even so, Riot gripped her greatsword firmly. “Amplify the miracle as much as you can. The Holy Knights won't last forever... Until then, I'll buy us time. Okay?”

He had no choice but to agree.

No matter what anyone said, she would save Justice. That was Riot's way of proving who she was now.

Suddenly, a holy light flashed right beside them. A faint white halo enveloped Justice's entire body. It conveyed a warm feeling to the boy and gradually healed his wounds.

“Warden...”

“Sacred Light Healing Array...” The other Holy War Officer, sweat dripping from his soot-covered face, summoned a healing miracle.

“With me, Justice, and Lady Jikita, we should be able to win... I'm counting on you...” He said it in a stiff but powerful voice. “There are probably less than twenty survivors left among my subordinates. But I want to save at least them... Holy War Officer Justice, please cooperate with me!”He had said the same thing when they first met.

Back then, it was an encounter that didn't stir much emotion. But now? Those same words filled Justice and Riot's limbs with fighting spirit. Warden's voice was overflowing with unwavering trust.

“Leave it... to us...!” Justice nodded and flashed his eyes at the evil spirit above. Gripping the Holy War Staff, he formed the Holy Seal.

Riot pointed her great sword at the forest behind them and turned a stern gaze toward Cesia “You stay hidden there. Don't come out until the battle is over. Understood?”

“Riot, I want to...”

“Just hide, okay?” Riot snapped. “Please, not here... Don't die. You're one of the few who knows about Jikita and the others' crimes. If you die, Alena won't be able to rest in peace...”

Cesia bowed her head apologetically.

Riot smiled into the girl's eyes. “You can confess your sins later...” Pushing the girl's back, Riott sent Cesia to safety. Watching her retreating figure for a moment, she slowly turned around.
“I'm going ahead!” She shouted to Warden, and the Battle Armor Demon rushed forward.
“Give Justice... your power!” Without waiting for a reply, Riot charged toward the evil spirit. The War Armor Demon's angry voice challenged the roar of the giant evil spirit.
“Aaaaaah!”

Another holy knight was devoured. There were only a handful of people left to maintain the front line. There were less than twenty people deployed around Zikita.
“Hold your ground, you lot!” The old woman focused her consciousness as she formed the Holy Seal. “I'll unleash another miracle! Hold out until then, no matter what!”
The one who answered that command was the approaching Evil Spirit itself. Yob Zoran was steadily growing larger. The magical lines radiating from its entire body transformed into shockwaves, making the grassland beneath its feet tremble. Torn grass flew into the sky, dust swirled wildly. It was a storm-like, malevolent pressure.
Jikita had been continuously summoning miracles. Even she needed the most difficult offensive miracle she knew to defeat a Demon God-class foe. But the Holy War Staff still refused to permit the moment of detonation. Time flowed agonizingly slow.
“Iayob Zoran... Iay, Iayob Zoran…” Countless intertwined serpents violently lashed with the enraged women's faces. Then, suddenly, those women began opening their mouths, aiming at the Holy Knights.
“No! Maintain the miracle...!” Jikita's voice, sensing the danger, rang out in vain.
The “Hidden Offensive Barrier” deployed by the Holy War Officers had already reached the limit of its effectiveness.
The Evil Spirit spat magical fireballs at that crimson barrier. They were purple-flamed, blazing at incredible speed. The magic shattered the miracle and surged into the circle of Holy Knights.
“Aaaahhh!” Screams piled up from all around.
Not only the holy knights, but even the Holy War Officers in the rear were engulfed in flames. Several burning human forms fell lifeless onto the grassland.
“Please flee, Lady Jikita!” One of the holy knights cried out in despair. “We alone cannot hold it back any longer! Please retreat for now!”
But Jikita did not move. Sweat beaded on her hand gripping the Holy War Staff.
The Church Leader, who had forgotten the realities of combat for some time, acutely felt her own aging. She hadn't expected consecutive summons to take this long... Just as she unconsciously tightened her grip on the staff, it happened.
“AAAAAAHHHHH!”
With a bloodcurdling scream, a crimson whirlwind burst onto the battlefield.
Riot, wielding a greatsword in each hand, suddenly appeared from the flank and charged toward the Evil Spirit.
Uncontrollable screams erupted from the Holy Knights. “It's too reckless, Lady Riot!”

But the Battle Armor Demon showed no fear. She swung her right sword down and swept her left sword sideways, boldly driving her greatswords into the spirit's necks, attacking from both sides.
"Aaaah! Aaaah!" The piercing screams echoed up to the sea of clouds.
The swords of Zodanium Holy Steel cleaved through the Demon God's flesh, scattering turquoise bodily fluids into the air.
The holy knights gasped in awe.
But the demon god's wounds regenerated instantly. Yob Zolran, burning with fury, concentrated its countless heads on Riot.
"Iya Yob Zoran... Iya, Iya... Yob Zoran…"
Fireballs rained down like a torrential downpour. The ground was blown apart, carriages shattered, but, dodging the concentrated fire, Riot sheathed his left greatsword behind his back.
"Retreat and tend to the wounded!" Reaching for his belt with his left hand, Riot warned those behind him. "I'll hold it off here! You weaklings are just dead weight!" As she spoke, she tore something apart. Then, swiftly, she swung her left arm.
What she hurled from her waist was a large napalm grenade. Filled with jelly-like gasoline, it erupted in a spectacular flame upon striking the Demon God's body.
"Aaaah! Aaaah! Aaaah! Aaaah!" The gasoline clinging to its body would burn for a while. In that time, Riot snapped the pins off the second and third grenades one after another.
"This should buy us some time!"
The explosive flames instantly licked over the entire body of the evil spirit. The napalm fire continued to torment its enormous, fifty-meter-long body.
"Old hag, still no miracle yet!" Riot yelled, yanking off the prosthetic part of her left hand. "If you could take it down, we wouldn't be in this mess!" She fired the exposed 40mm grenade launcher like a machine gun. The aiming function hadn't been restored. But against an enemy this massive, aiming wasn't necessary. Riot yelled behind her again.
"Everyone, get down!" The moment she yelled, she braced himself for the massive shockwave. The fired projectiles struck the demon god one after another. Suddenly, a blindingly huge fireball swelled up. Heat, shock, blast, and deafening roar crashed down on them like a raging torrent.
"Lady Riot!" The holy knights instinctively flinched at the explosion's abnormal ferocity. The power far surpassed that of grenades, knocking even the Demon God heavily backward. The precious high-pressure fuel-air warheads possessed enough power to obliterate an entire city. She had fired them in rapid succession - even the Demon God couldn't help but be overwhelmed.
Seizing that opening, Jikita raised her Holy War Staff high. "Annihilate the Forbidden Child Horde!" This miracle fell from the heavens. Piercing the sea of clouds, a rain of hundreds of beams poured down upon Yob Zoran.
The beams were angels. Naked infants flapped their wings and charged into the Demon God's body. But these were no ordinary angels. They were Guardian Angels of Combat, bearing four arms and roaring with fanged mouths. The angels' suicide charge tore holes in the Demon God's flesh, even causing explosions within its

body. The half-destroyed demon god emitted steam from its entire body, writhing in agony.

“A-E-A-A-A! A-E-A-A-A!” The Demon God's colossal form crashed noisily into the earth. Several heads were torn off, plummeting burning into the encampment.

Yet at the same moment, Jikita had also dropped to her knees. The old woman felt the life force draining from her entire body. “Lady Jikita!”

“Hold on!” The paladins, rushing over instinctively, took their eyes off the Demon God for just a moment. But Jikita had sensed Yob Zolan’s final desperate struggle.

“Don’t let your guard down yet! That creature...”

“Iayob Zoran... I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I!!!” Magic rippled through the air and spread across it.

The paladins, engulfed by the wave, all instinctively covered their ears with both hands.

“Aaaargh!” Blood gushed out from deep within their eardrums. Their brains, poisoned by the evil god’s voice, had exploded inside their skulls. The brain matter that flew out was hot, even giving off a spectacular plume of steam.

“Giiiiiiih!” Zikita instinctively covered her ears as well. Something was about to burst out of her head. Desperately fighting it off, the old woman collapsed where she stood. “Help me! Please, help me!”

It was the first time in her 180-plus years of life that she had uttered those words. But all around her, the Holy Knights were also falling and rolling on the ground.

Only Riot remained, swinging hergreatsword and grappling with the head of the approaching Evil Spirit. Perhaps her hearing had been severed, for the Battle Armor Demon did not even turn to face it.

Jikita was terrified as she felt her eyeballs bulge. But, as if to drown out that terror, Warden’s scream dominated the battlefield.

“Multiple Eruption Heat Wave!” Ancient sacred characters floated in the air, swirling wildly before eventually forming a line. The vast, glowing sequence of characters surrounding the Evil God shone red and simultaneously spewed out countless streams of lava. The Evil God’s body began to melt away under the miraculous flames. With his skin melted and flesh crumbling, Job Zoran writhed in agony and halted his magic.

“W-Warden…!” Jikita looked up at her subordinate, the Holy War Officer. Warden had already summoned a barrier of miracles, firmly holding back the waves of magic. Justice had joined that barrier as well. The boy concentrated his mind with all his might, greatly amplifying the miracle he had summoned.

“Good, Justice...” While maintaining the barrier, Warden nodded. “You deliver the finishing blow... With your power, you should be able to do it...”

“Go!” The boy raised his fingers, which were forming a holy seal, and thrust them forcefully toward the evil god. But for a split second, his gaze was drawn to his own hand.

Warden realized it instantly. After unleashing the miracle here, something strange would surely happen to Justice’s body. Would Justice have the strength left to explain himself to those who witnessed that change...? But, as if to blow away that hesitation, Riot shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Leave the rest to me, Justice!” Plunging her sword into the neck of the approaching Demon God, the Battle Armor Demon leaped backward.

“This is what we’re here for, after all! Don’t worry! Show them your proof!” She poured every ounce of strength into her words of encouragement. She didn’t care who blamed Justice for becoming helpless. But no matter what anyone said, she alone would save Justice. That was Riot’s proof.
“I get it…!” Justice let out a short cry. Having cast aside his hesitation, the boy unleashed the power of the God of Creation from the Holy Seal. “Final Strike…!”
Riot watched in silence.
“Sacred Inferno Falling Strike!” The Evil Spirit’s screams were drowned out by the incantation. Directly in front of Yob Zolan, a rotating circular formation materialized. From the sacred formation Justice had drawn in the air, a blinding torrent of flames surged forth.
“Aaaah! Aaaah!” The roaring Evil Spirit mobilized every surviving head. It spewed a barrage of fireballs at the sacred formation. Miracle and magic collided head-on, and a massive flash of light spread across the camp.
“Get down!” Warden’s shout was swallowed by the explosion. A colossal shockwave blew everyone away. The earth was torn apart, and boulders were reduced to dust. Covered wagons shattered, and the water’s surface boiled. Even the paladins who had escaped the magic were tossed about by the violent tremors.
“Justice!” In the forest behind her, Cesia was blinded by the light. Shockwaves and intense heat spread throughout the area, and a deafening roar echoed across the land.
And then… silence fell.

Clouds drifted calmly by.
The wind, too, had regained its usual tranquility.
The Logta horses that had bolted from the carriage whinnied here and there, and above her, small birds began to chirp. Hiding behind a rock and clutching her dagger, Cesia covered her ears for a moment, listening to the lingering echoes of the fierce battle. Fragments and clumps of earth were scattered all around.
Seeing that it had subsided, Cesia cautiously peeked out from behind the rock. Only after the flashes of light ceased and the black smoke began to dissipate did Sesia finally dash out of the forest, searching for the boy.
“Justice!” Her feet stumbled as she ran. Still, Sesia raced across the meadow. “Justice, where are you...!” She stopped abruptly mid-sentence.
Before her eyes loomed a black mass of flesh, like a small hill. Emitting a sizzling, charred sound, it was none other than the corpse of the evil god Yob Zoran. But what truly shocked Sesia was not the manner of his death.
“Justice, you...”
She couldn’t bring herself to say anything more. There on the grassland, the boy lay sprawled out as if crawling. He was on his knees, supporting his exhausted body with both hands. He didn’t move a muscle, but he was definitely conscious.
Yet on the hand of the boy who had cast aside his Holy War Staff, a strange pattern was writhing.
The girl was no stranger to that red glow. Cesia’s gaze was drawn to the heretical symbol. “Justice… you… why do you have something like that…”

“I wonder why myself… Even I… don’t know…” Keeping his eyes closed, Justice spoke in short, halting bursts. But while desperately fighting against his fading consciousness, the boy slowly stood up. “To find out why… that’s why I’m on this pilgrimage… but I still… don’t know why…” ”

As he tried to walk toward Cesia, his strength gave out. But this time, it was the girl’s turn to catch Justice as he was about to fall. “Justice, pull yourself together!” Sesia cradled the boy in her arms and crouched down where they stood. At the same time, she tossed her dagger aside. The blade, no longer needed by Sesia, rolled across the grassy plain, emitting a dull glow. “You can’t die! You can’t die!”

Wailing, the girl clung to Justice. “For me to survive and for you to die... that’s wrong! No, it can’t be!”

Justice had given his life to the girl. He had given his life to Sesia, the one he was supposed to have deceived. He wanted to apologize so much, to thank her so much. Those feelings turned into sobs, welling up from deep within his chest.

Riot gently placed both hands on the shoulders of the weeping girl.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to die...”

"Riot..."
"I'm just a little tired—it's nothing new. The fact that I'm still conscious today is actually a sign I'm in good spirits..." She smiled wearily and winked, then Riot slowly turned to look behind her.
The surviving paladins had surrounded the three of them. Though the evil spirit had already been defeated, they still clutched their longswords. Their expressions were far more tense than before, and some could even be seen trembling slightly.
"Lord Justice, what is the meaning of this...?" In a tragic voice, one paladin stepped forward. "We believed you to be… a noble Holy Officer…"
"Then what is that mark…?"
"Isn't that the emblem of the heretical sect?!"
"Why do you have such a thing…!" A whirlwind of despair and indignation surged through the air. Then a questioning voice rang out across the area.
"Are you… not a Holy Warrior?"
The words struck Riot's entire body like a blow. Reflexively, the Battle Armor Demon clenched her fists tightly. "What on earth were you all looking at?!"
It was a cry of utter frustration. "This child just fought a Demon God! He fought to save you all! Anyone could see that this child fulfilled his duty as a Holy Crusader!"
"But that is the mark of the heretical sect!" The Holy Knight raised his voice as well. "We are Holy Knights… trained since childhood… we live to defeat those who bear that mark… we cannot let this pass…"
"Cesia, I…" Just as he began to speak, Justice choked violently. Cesia looked down at the boy's hand. The strange mark was still flickering with light.
Even so, the girl shouted at the Holy Knights.
"Please believe in Justice!" Cesia's voice trembled with pleading. "I lied! But Justice is different! He really is a Holy Warrior!"
"It doesn't matter either way, not anymore..." Suddenly, a raspy voice froze the scene. Jikita, clinging to her Holy War Staff, staggered forward. She gripped it.
"Jikita, you..."
"Yeah, whether Justice is a Holy War Officer or a Blood Pact Member, I don't care anymore... I don't care about that anymore..." The exhausted old woman still managed a smile. Her face looked half-mad. "The problem is that you found out about Warun Village... and saved Cesia... You've exposed everything I tried to hide... I can't forgive you..." The old woman formed a holy seal with her trembling fingers. Where in that small, withered body did she still have such power left? The Holy War Staff gradually began to emit a holy light.
"If you harm these children, I'll shoot you!" Riot raised his gun and declared firmly.
"Jikita, are you really going to do this?"
"Yes, I will! I'll kill all three of them!" Zikita continued to scream in fury. "I am justice! Vaslan's justice! I'm not the villain! Anyone who gets in my way deserves to die!" The holy light rapidly converged.
Riot, driven by rage, pulled the trigger. "You're the one who's going to die!"
"Circumventing Strike!"
Riot and Zikita's roars collided head-on.
But Riot's eyes widened in shock.
"Warden!"

The Holy War Officer suddenly dashed forward, spreading his arms wide to block Jikita's path. The bullet fired by the Battle Armor Demon struck Warden in the shoulder.

"Gaaah!" The remaining round was a standard projectile, but the ferocious impact tore flesh from Warden's shoulder and sent him flying straight backward.

"Mr. Warden…!" Justice was just beginning to regain consciousness. But the miracle Jikita had unleashed charged fiercely toward Justice and the others.

"It's going to vanish, Justice!" There was no time for Riot to shield him. Cesia embraced Justice and fixed her gaze resolutely on the bolt of lightning. The paladins held their breath. Right before their eyes...

The "Circumventing Strike" suddenly twisted its trajectory. Just before it reached Justice, it plummeted toward the ground. There, lying ahead, was the magical dagger Cesia had abandoned.

"No way…!" Ignoring Jikita's despair, the bolt of lightning struck the dagger. It caused a small explosion, shattering the blade into pieces. And with that, it was all over.

"Warden!" Shouting, Riot rushed over to the Holy Officer. He lifted his blood-soaked shoulder and stared at her with eyes wide with shock.

"You… you knew this would happen…"

"At this point… there's only one source of magical power left here… If Lady Jikita used a miracle… that strike had no choice but to hit the dagger…" Gasping for breath, Warden said. "If Justice were a Blood Oath-bound... he would have been slain... But miracles... exist to defeat the power of magic... Cesia can no longer defeat Lady Jikita... ... much less Justice..."

The paladin who had approached to tend to her wounds also stopped in his tracks. That very strike was proof that Justice was not a Blood Oath-bound. "Cesia's sins, too... are not to be judged by miracles... They should be judged by the law... Just like yours… Lord Jikita..."

"Are you planning to judge Jikita?"

"I thought that would be best..."

As the paladins staunched the bleeding from his shoulder, Warden's face contorted. "Justice likely cooperated with me in the end for that very reason... without thinking of defeating Lady Jikita... but to save her life... and to judge her sins... but..."

He exhaled deeply. "It seems... God has already passed judgment..."

Riot turned to look at the old woman.

Behind them, Jikita was frantically waving her Holy War Staff. But despite forming the sacred seal, the rare gem Metalite refused to glow.

The paladins stood dumbfounded.

"No way… Lady Jikita…"

As his consciousness faded, Justice firmly formed the sacred seal and made the sign of the cross. "...As I thought, God is watching..." Tears of joy streamed down the boy's cheeks. "Repent, you who abuse miracles..." Reciting a passage from the Holy Scriptures, Justice wore a gentle smile.

But Jikita, with a look of fury unlike any seen before, cursed the Creator God. "Why! Why is this happening!" The old woman, in a state of confusion, continued to

scream. “God! Creator God! Why won’t you grant me a miracle! Why!? Why is this happening!?”
Everyone burned the sight of her pitifully comical figure into their memories. Unaware of their gaze, Jikita swung her staff with single-minded determination. “I repented too! For what happened in Warun Village! For propping up the nation with medicine! Didn’t I offer prayers every day so I wouldn’t lose my miracle?! That sin should have been forgiven! So why are you abandoning me now?!”
“With that strike just now...” Warden spoke with his eyes closed. “You attempted to slay a Holy War Officer… a warrior of God permitted to wield miracles… That is nothing less than an act of rebellion against God. It cannot be forgiven…”
Without a sound, Jikita collapsed. The Holy Staff rolled away, echoing a hollow, empty sound. At the end of the Eternal Mentor’s life, the Holy Knights remained silent.
“The rest… is up to me…” Warden let out a sigh. “Though I didn’t know it, I was complicit in the massacre of Warun Village… I bear some blame for allowing that to lead to the terrible revenge taken by Alena and Cesia…”
Before the Battle Armor Demon, Warden pulled a vial from his pocket. With only a few pills remaining, it made a faint clinking sound. “Besides… one who relies on such things has no right to be called a warrior of God… I knew that… but I just couldn’t stop myself…”
But the Battle Armor Demon merely laughed dismissively. “You just had nothing else to rely on. You can fight your way through this with the medicine. It’ll be a tough battle, but… it’s not something that warrants God’s judgment, is it?”
Cesia clenched her fists tightly and let tears fall onto Justice’s chest.
Riot crushed the medicine bottle in one swift motion. Then, shifting her stance, she turned Warden’s gaze toward the two behind him.
“Cesia...”
“Lady Riot, I... I... I helped kill so many people, even innocent children, and tried to aid in the revival of the Evil Spirit… I should have died with Alena.”
“What are you talking about!” Riot snapped at the girl’s tears. “You have no reason to die… Why would you say such a thing…!”
“Because there’s nothing I can do!” In a voice filled with despair, the girl declared. “I’m not a Holy Warrior like Lord Warden! I can’t do anything for anyone! Even if I live, I can’t make amends!” Cesia tossed her hair back and sobbed, looking up at the Battle Armor Demon with tear-filled eyes. “Please kill me. I… I have no right to live…” The girl closed her eyes in silence.
Warden and the Holy Knights watched over Riot. But in place of the Battle Armor Demon, who could not move a muscle, the boy spoke up.
“I went through all that trouble to save you… You can’t die…” In his dazed state, Justice clenched the girl’s hand. The boy spoke to her eyes as if in a delirium.
“A lot of people died… I don’t think they’ll forgive you… but let’s live and make amends. Everyone here has seen your memories… even if they don’t forgive you, I’ll live on with their strength. It’ll be hard, but… there must be people who’ll understand.”
Cesia held her breath. What welled up in her throat was the strong, remorseful feeling of a young girl. “Does someone like that… Even exist?”

"I'll look for them. I'll look for them too…" The boy smiled brightly. "I won't let you be the only one who suffers… I'll live on with you… That's okay with you, right…?"
"Justice…" Cesia buried her face in the boy's hair. She was desperately holding back her sobs. Justice gently stroked her soot-stained hair, and then finally lost consciousness.
(Rest easy….) Looking down at her partner, the Battle Armor Demon lowered his eyelids.

The grassland was enveloped in silence.
No screams or shouts could be heard anymore.
Under the sky through which only a cold wind blew, Riot let out a small sigh of relief.
She stood there, stiff as a board.
"Welcome to the Trading Village of Rio Robo." The signpost was still being battered by the wind, screeching and creaking. Looking up at the signpost, Warden asked again, slowly.
"Are you really… not planning to stop by?"
"That village doesn't need us anymore." Justice answered with a smile. "They'd welcome us if we went… but our journey has a purpose. There's someone… I have to find…" Justice replied from the driver's seat of the covered wagon. Warden could only nod in response to the boy's words. Satisfied, he extended his right hand.
"When we first met, I didn't shake your hand… I just couldn't bring myself to do it…" Ashamed of himself, Warden said. "But now... I'm the one asking. You've been so kind to me. Please... will you shake my hand?"
"With pleasure, Warden." In the mist, the two Holy Warriors clasped hands. For the first time since their parting, a powerful bond passed between them.
Just then, Cesia's voice rang out from beyond the morning mist. "Lord Justice!" Her flaxen hair flying wildly, the girl burst out of the mist. And just as she was about to throw herself into Justice's arms on the driver's seat… she stopped short and clenched her fist tightly. "Are you really going?" Tears were already streaming down her cheeks. The girl, who had believed he would come with her to Vaslan, was clearly bewildered by this sudden farewell.
But Justice smiled as he reached out for Cesia's fist. "Yeah, I have to go... It's sad to part with you, but I have my own journey to make... A journey that I don't know how long it will last..."
Cesia's grip tightened. Like a child throwing a tantrum, she clung to Justice and refused to let go. Smiling at her, Justice gently pushed her away.
"You'll be okay on your own, right, Cesia?"
"..."
"Answer me properly, Sesia."
"...Yes..." A voice so faint it seemed about to vanish spoke those words.
Looking apologetic, the boy lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry... But let's meet again."
"Jus......" A sob choked Cesia's throat before she could finish.
Justice gazed at his partner beside him - Riot was also seated on the driver's seat.

The Battle Armor Demon scratched the back of her neck with an exasperated look.

"Seriously, you've kept us waiting quite a while. You aren't planning on sharing a goodbye kiss next, are you?"

"W-what are you talking about? Don't be ridiculous!" Justice's face turned bright red.

Warden handed a small pouch to Riot, who was smiling mischievously. "Sorry, but this is all I've got on me right now. I think it's about 100,000 dollars." However, the Holy War Officer's face clouded over. "Are you sure this is really enough…? Even if we don't go all the way to Vaslan, if we just return to Rio Robo Village, I could offer a proper reward…"

"What can I say? It's a big hassle." Saying this matter-of-factly, Riot accepted the bag of reward money. "Defeating a Demon God of that caliber for just 100,000 dollars is actually an unbelievably low price. But in exchange, the trials of Jikita and Sesia… I'm sorry, but I'm leaving that up to you…"

"That's fine, but still…"

"It's okay. I'll get you to repay the favor somewhere down the line. Besides…" Riot, who had started to speak, sighed at Warden, who looked apologetic. "Well, at the end of the day, we're just vagabonds." Still holding the reins, Riot shrugged.

"We're not the kind of people who can stay in one place for long. We don't have that luxury. You get it?" But Warden didn't return her smile. For some reason, he was watching the two of them with a look of sympathy. Even if he fought as a Holy Crusader and was thanked no matter how much, Justice would be persecuted if his heretical crest were discovered.

It was a gaze that reflected on that arduous journey. But for Riot, that was enough.

Just finding someone who thought that way made her feel truly saved.

"Anyway... I'm counting on you to look after Cesia." Taking Justice's place, she reached out and shook hands with Warden.

"Protecting Cesia is my duty. Besides, it's a way to repay the debt I owe you both." Warden glanced behind him. The surviving Holy Knights were already riding down the mountain road in a carriage. Among them was Jikita, bound and restrained. With renewed resolve, Warden gave a nod.

"Leave the rest to me. I really… owe you all a debt of gratitude. See you again…"

"Yes, truly… someday."

"Lord Justice!" Cesia wiped away her tears.

But without a word, Justice formed the Sign of the Cross with his fingers.

Riot, too, silently gave a sharp tug on the reins.

The covered wagon set off along the trade route with a clatter, eventually fading quietly into the morning mist.

"Is it okay if I… get some sleep?"

Justice asked from the driver's seat.

"I didn't get much sleep last night. When I thought about Cesia, I couldn't help but wonder… what will happen to her from here on out…"

"We just have to leave it up to Warden." Riot cracked her whip against the Logta horse and smiled at her partner. "It's impossible to see every person's life through to the end… I know you're worried, but… you have your own journey… So for now, just focus on it."

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry, I’ll go get some sleep now...”
“Yes, you really should......”
The small Holy Crusader scrambled into the cargo area. Watching his back disappear, Riot let out a deep sigh.
Many faces floated through her mind.
Sesia... Arena... Warden… Jikita... Garcia, Febres, Raemos...
Countless destinies were lost, and countless destinies were saved.
It was Justice who changed the people’s destinies and bestowed new ones upon them. But the boy curled up on the truck bed was already snoring. His sleeping face was still that of a child.
Riot was surprised, dumbfounded, and then smiled. “You’re a strange one, aren’t you...” But only Riot had noticed. Just one—the fate most important to her—had been left behind by the waves of change.
(To save that kid myself... What will it take?... Can I do it?... Can I save him?...)
I have to save him.
That feeling grew stronger, to the point of being tragic.
It seemed as though everything had been resolved.
But the fate of Justice, the Holy War Officer, hadn’t changed one bit.

【Afterword by Takeo Ichikawa】

So, just as I was about to write a new story...
Several ideas I wanted to write about started bubbling up in my head all on their own.

I want to write a story about a duo of protagonists burdened with tragic fates...
I want to set it in a lawless, Western-style world...
I want to use some high-tech gadgets...
But I also want to do the final war between God and the Devil...
I want to include some scenes that make you laugh a little...

The ideas flying around in my head are like puzzle pieces. After selecting, twisting, and combining them, I turned them into a single picture... That is this work, “Dark Frontier Blues.”
The first short story was published in the September 2000 issue of Dragon Magazine as one of the entries for the Ryuou Cup. Thank you to everyone who cast a vote for me in the Ryuou Cup. I hope you enjoy this newly written work as well.

That said, ever since my debut, I’ve received so much emotional support, and I’m truly grateful.
Above all, nothing makes me happier than fan letters. They’re truly a lifeline for a writer! They’re the driving force behind my writing!
I know this sounds like a cliché, but...
To all my readers, thank you so much.

And I’d also like to express my gratitude to Poporucha-san, who provided the illustrations for this issue... When my editor faxed me the rough sketches for the magazine, I was so surprised I couldn’t stop laughing.
It was as if she had captured the images in my mind—Justice and Riot were drawn exactly as I’d imagined them!
Hoborucha has visualized “Dark Frontier Blues” so masterfully that it’s almost too perfect. It’s no exaggeration to say she’s practically the other author.
Everyone, please be sure to send Poporucha some words of encouragement as well! Just like me, fan letters are her lifeline!

Finally, I’d like to wrap up this afterword by listing the sources of inspiration for the “miracles.” All of them are borrowed from rock song titles and album names. Some match the image of the miracle perfectly, while others might leave you scratching your head. If you get the chance, please give them a listen.

Until next time—let’s meet somewhere in the New World.

In the last year and last month of the 20th century,

Takeo Ichikawa

ROUNDABOUT YES (FRAGILE) 1972

FOR YOUR LIFE LED ZEPPELIN (PRESENCE) 1976

PYROMANIA DEF LEPARD (PYROMANIA) 1983

ACES HIGH IRON MAIDEN (POWERSLAVE) 1984

RAZORS EDGE AC/DC (RAZORS EDGE) 1990

STORMBRINGER DEEP PURPLE (STORMBRINGER) 1974

IN THE LIGHT LED ZEPPELIN (PHISICAL GRAFFITI) 1975

DREAM EVIL DIO (DREAM EVIL) 1987

WALLS OF JERICO HELLOWEEN (WALLS OF JERICO) 1986

MARCH OF THE BLACK QUEEN QUEEN (QUEEN II) 1974

CHILDREN OF THE DAMNED IRON MAIDEN (THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST) 1982

ERUPTION VAN HALEN (VAN HALEN) 1978

Translator's note:

Hi guys! NineSoulsSea here, hope you enjoyed this translation of **Takeo Ichikawa**'s light novel, **Dark Frontier Blues**! As always, special thanks to **aNobody101** for telling me about the method to obtain BookWalker raws which I've used for this translation and will continue using in the future! This one surprised me actually because I went in thinking it would be a more generic fantasy but it's got some interesting twists and turns – a post-apocalyptic world, modern-technology, drugs… But I liked it! I'd dare say the setting is pretty unique but I'm sure there's some 1997 JRPG with the same premise and someone out there would be eager to point that out, hahaha! Still, just like with Ichikawa's other works, I feel like DFB would be perfect material for an anime adaptation – something like Slayers or Rune Soldier which also originated as light novels, to my knowledge - a long-running fantasy show adaptation! There's still three more books in the series so **Dark Frontier Blues 2** is up next! Get excited!

And that's about it! Thank you for reading and have a miraculous day!